

Prepare the Way

Luke 1:57-80

Cradock Presbyterian Church

December 22, 2012

This passage from the end of Luke, chapter one, tells us how John's father viewed his son's purpose in the world. Zechariah knew that when God came to bring salvation, he'd need someone to announce his coming, someone to call attention to his mighty deeds. The angel had made it pretty clear, back there when Zechariah lost his voice: his son John was going to be that special prophet to announce the coming of God's presence among them, to tell the people to "prepare the way."

But what exactly would he be doing to prepare the way? What does it mean to "prepare the way?" Zechariah mentions giving "knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins." But then you have this passage in Luke chapter 3, where John himself defines what it means to prepare the way: Make his paths straight, fill every valley, make every hill low, make crooked roads straight and rough roads smooth. THEN "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

So is John into *infrastructure*? Is that the deal? I think we have to dig a little deeper – these words are obviously a powerful set of symbols, but what do they mean?

You can begin by noting that they come from Isaiah, chapter 40. We know that the prophet was writing in the time of exile. Israel was in Babylon, defeated, away from home. They needed to hear that their God was not done with them. The prophet wrote to tell them that their salvation was imminent. Indeed, the opening verses of Isaiah chapter 40 say this:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

Isaiah was setting the stage for the participation of the people; it was they who would need to work to “prepare the way” for the salvation to come.

What is this imagery, then, of leveling everything off? Of flattening out mountains and filling in valleys and smoothing out the road? It’s a military image. Think about it. Can an army be more effective attacking across rough, hilly terrain – or on flat, level, good roads? The answer is obvious. If you’re wanting that liberating army to get there the fastest and have the best shot at liberating you, you’ll work to make their way into your city as easy as you can make it!

How will that happen with this “one who is to come?” John tells you in chapter 3 of Luke. He was “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” And note how Luke writes this! He was doing this baptism of repentance for forgiveness “*as it is written* in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah.” The baptisms, and especially John’s proclamations that went along with them, were the things that prepared the way, that made the hills low and the valleys high and the crooked straight. It’s all about obstacles; John’s work was removing the obstacles to the salvation that God was sending, like a liberating army, in Jesus.

And if you back up a little bit, John’s miraculous birth was a “preparing the way,” as well. There hadn’t been a miraculous birth like that for centuries; John’s birth prepared the way for Jesus’ birth. Israel had stopped believing there would be any more

revelations like that, any more visitations by God; John's birth prepared them for the new, ultimate visitation in Jesus.

Which brings us to today. John was preparing the way for Jesus by trying to remove the obstacles preventing him from doing his saving work. You and I need to prepare the way for him today by removing obstacles to his salvation for today's people. And there are plenty of obstacles, lots for us to do.

There is the high hill, the big mountain, of distraction. So many things rise up to block the people's vision, to force them to go a long ways out of the way. There are all kinds of worthwhile things that our world offers us; but none of them are as important as the salvation and love we have in Jesus Christ. You and I have to level off this big mountain that's getting in people's way, to prepare their way to the Lord, so they can enjoy the peace that we already have. Maybe we can point out how important Christmas is, and that it's NOT important because it pumps up the economy! It's important because it's about salvation; it's important because it tells us how much we are loved by God.

There is the low valley of self-centeredness. So many people are out there who think they are all they need. They think they don't have any need for God, no need to be saved from anything. They don't know the quality of life they're missing out on, the quality of life you and I already know. From down in the bottom of the valley of self, they can't see much of anything but themselves. We *prepare the way* when we fill in that valley with the truth of what God has done for us, beginning in a manger in Bethlehem so long ago. Christmas is sure a good time to start, since everybody knows about that

manger, and if you were in the Sunday School class this morning, you *really* understand now what that manger was all about. It was about a God who filled in the valley for everyone.

Then there are the crooked ways, and I think they're the temptations we face in this life. Mostly it's about money and possessions and material things for people in our world, but power is sort of a part of that. This one's a real problem. I was stunned this week to see and hear the head of the National Rifle Association stand up before the world and take a hard line on guns, specifically in light of the horror of Newtown, Connecticut. This was all about power; and since the NRA gets its power from gun manufacturers and dealers, it's about money. I mention this because it's fresh in my mind, and it's an especially clear example of "crooked ways." But I could just as well be talking about possessions. People become unreasonable and unreachable when it comes to what they have. You and I know better. We need to help prepare the way by removing the distorting pressure of possessions from people, so they can be reached by our Lord, and become *his* people.

Finally there are the "rough places" we're supposed to make smooth. I liken this to our own humanness, our own emotions that sometimes get the better of people like you and me. You and I have learned a little better than the folks on the outside how to handle them, but even we aren't perfect. Here's where things done in the heat of the moment, or things held inside the long-term hurt that festers, create potholes and ruts and all sorts of roughness that make the road to our Lord impassable. You and I can really help prepare the way here: we know all about forgiveness, about how God will

help us smooth out the potholes and bumps we've made. We can do this; we can prepare the way for those who need it the most to the salvation that comes from our Lord.

Let me conclude by saying this: I know that you're entering into a time of preparation for the holiday that's upon us. You've got things you need to do, food to cook, possibly presents to buy, certainly presents to wrap. You've got little things to do to prepare for the big day. Carry this thought with you, and ponder it as you do your work: All of our lives, all that we do, is or should be about preparing the way for others to enjoy the blessings of salvation that our Lord has given to us. In fact, to everyone. If you can do that, then your Christmas this year will have more meaning and power than ever before, and your New Year of 2013 will be the best ever.