



Preparing

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

Series: Advent 2012, #2

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Introduction

This second Sunday of Advent our focus is on *Preparing*. We know something about preparing—preparing for birthdays, holidays, weddings, tests, job interviews, special events, visits by relatives, friends or even dignitaries.

Queen Elizabeth has made over a hundred state visits in her sixty years on the throne. They are well planned, and planned well in advance with a multitude of detailed formalities of protocol and practicalities of scheduling and security. All those details for her last visit to Canada, as I recall reading, cost our federal and provincial governments about \$1 M. per day, on top of the Queen's own costs.

The most important guest in human history was Jesus Christ, who was born in Bethlehem to die on the cross outside of Jerusalem for our sins, and be raised from the dead in victory. What were the preparations for that? How do we prepare for celebrating His birth? We are going to look at that this morning.

John The Baptist Preparing The Way For Christ.

A multitude of factors and details were involved in preparing for Christ's coming to earth. Let's zero in on one, on *John the Baptist preparing the way for Christ*, and not only learn *about* him, but *from* him for ourselves.

The first thing to note is that John was *selected* by God to prepare the way for Christ. About 700 years before John the Baptist was born, the prophet Isaiah wrote, as we read earlier,

“A voice is calling, ‘Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. Let every valley be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; and let the rough ground become a plain, and the rugged terrain a broad valley; then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’” (40:3-5)

The immediate reference of these words was to God's promise to lead the people of Judah from captivity in Babylon back to their land. God directed Mark to pick up this statement and tell us that John the Baptist also fulfilled it by preparing the way for Christ. Mark writes,

“As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: ‘Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.”’ John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (1:2-4)

In His sovereignty and by His grace, God chose John the Baptist for this important work of preparing the people for Christ and His ministry.

God's special work of selecting John the Baptist is also evident in his birth, as we see in Luke chapter 1. His father was a priest named Zacharias. He and his wife Elizabeth had no children and now were, as Luke put it, “advanced in years” (7). When Zacharias was serving in the Temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and said “... your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John” (13). The angel went on to say,

“For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (15-17).

God, in a direct and unique way, selected John for the mission of preparing the way for Christ.

Then, at God's appointed time, John *served* God in preparing the way for Christ. He was faithful to his calling. He made the choice to obey and serve God. Isaiah said that John would be the one who would call people to clear the way for the Messiah, for Christ (40:3). The angel Gabriel said he would be filled with the Holy Spirit,¹ would turn many back to God,² would go before Christ to “make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”³

And that is exactly how John served in preparing the way for Christ. Go back to Mark chapter 1, verse 4.

“John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins” (4-5).

His message was “Repent! Recognize, confess and turn from your sin to following God!” While we don't know all we might like to about baptism among Jewish people then, it was

sometimes done as a symbol of confessing and turning from sin. The baptism pictured God washing them clean of their sin and its guilt.

Through John's faithful service many people in Israel turned from sin, were following God and, as a result, would be more actively looking for and open to the Messiah God had promised. Many of these undoubtedly later heard Christ and followed him, as some of John's own disciples did.⁴

John's service had a cost. He willingly *sacrificed* to serve God. Serving someone by definition includes sacrifice. Serving another means giving up setting the course or agenda. Serving someone means giving up control, giving up being independent. It means not working for your own ends. True service involves real sacrifice.

John was not an oddball, nor a counter-culture protestor, nor yet a back to nature activist. God does not tell us why he directed John to preach in the wilderness, to have a simple and unusual manner of dress and diet. But God directed him. And John sacrificed many comforts to serve God.

Part of his sacrifice was knowing and accepting that his role was not the lead, but a supporting one. Note what he said in Mark 1 verse 7.

“After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (7-8).

In the gospel written by John the disciple of Jesus, John the Baptist is recorded as saying “This [Jesus] was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me’” (1:15). He clearly told those listening to him he was not the Messiah but the one who was preparing the way for the Messiah.⁶ Then as Christ began to minister and John's time for ministry drew to a close, he said “He [Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease.”⁷ John pointed his own disciples to Jesus, and some of them left him and followed Jesus.⁸

As well, John made the sacrifice of declaring God's righteous word to everyone, even to King Herod, who was far from being right with God and displayed no interest in being right with God. The king had him arrested and thrown into prison.⁹ Then, in a foolish move that later grieved the king himself, he had John beheaded.¹⁰ John the Baptist was selected by God, he served God, and he sacrificed for God to prepare the way for Christ.

Our Preparing The Way For Christ.

John the Baptist was a unique man. One day Jesus told the crowds, “...among those born of women there is no one greater than John.”¹¹ John the Baptist had a unique mission. He was the one who filled the role of going ahead of Jesus to prepare people for Him. At the same time John is an example for us. In fact, the principles that were true of John and his work for Christ are true of every believer, and should be seen in us.

Hard to believe? Well, there is even more. Listen to Jesus' complete statement to the crowds that day. "... among those born of women there is no one greater than John; *yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.*"¹² Every believer standing this side of the cross has an even higher position, privilege and responsibility than John the Baptist. God enables us to full all the responsibilities He gives us, including *preparing the way for Christ*, preparing the way for others to see and believe in Him.

We have been selected by God to prepare the way for Christ. Before Jesus ascended back to heaven He gave the disciples their marching orders. Orders which also are for all who believe in Him throughout the history of the church. Matthew recorded it at the end of his gospel.

"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (28:18-20)

It is Christ's command, and so then our mission. We find the same thrust from Jesus in the first chapter of Acts.

"... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." (1:8)

We are to carry this out with the certainty of Almighty God's unlimited, sovereign power.

"What, me?" Yes, you. You, me, and every believer. God has selected us and ordered us to prepare the way for Christ. There are no exceptions. No exceptions by age — no believer is too young or too old. No exceptions by our type of personality. No exceptions by what we know or don't know. No exceptions by how skilled or unskilled we are in speaking.

"Is this really the way it is?" The apostle Paul described the process of people coming to Christ in Romans 10. Beginning at verse 13 he tells us,

"'Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!'" (13-15)

All believers are *heralds*, *announcers* or *preachers* of the gospel. All of us are to speak, to encourage and even send others to live and speak the good news, the gospel of Christ. If you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ and know Him as your Savior, you have been selected by God for the high and awesome privilege of *preparing the way for Christ*.

Having been selected by God, then we, like John the Baptist, are to serve Him in preparing the way for Christ. The apostle Paul is a good example for us in many ways. Note just three aspects of his service of preparing the way for Christ. First, he *began immediately* after he was saved. Luke records in Acts 9 that after Paul placed his faith in Christ, was baptized and spent several days with other believers, he “immediately ... began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’” (9:18-20). He did not wait or hesitate. He began immediately.

Second, he *was eager* to prepare the way for Christ. He told the church at Rome that he was eager to preach the gospel in their city, with all the advantages and dangers of it being the center of the empire (1:15).

Third, *his number one topic and priority of conversation* was not the weather, the economy or politics, but the good news of Christ. He reminded the church in Corinth in his first letter to them that he came to them proclaiming the gospel. He said, “For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (2:2). That does not mean Paul never discussed the weather or politics, but his clear focus and emphasis was on the gospel.

Question: Do we speak of Christ immediately, eagerly, and have Him and the gospel at the heart of our thoughts and conversations? What are you doing, what will you be doing in this season to serve God by preparing the way for people to see and come to Christ? How can we do that this Christmas? Many of us prepared Operation Christmas Child Shoe Boxes which will not share our words, but Christ’s and our love. Then there’s our choice of Christmas decorations and cards. We can help the poor, homeless, and sick this Christmas. We can invite people to come, or even bring them with us to the Christmas Program next Sunday morning and the Christmas Eve Service. We can bless people who work in 24-7 services including the hospital, RCMP, etc. with a card or Christmas goodies. And, yes, we can *talk about Jesus* with others.

We might say, “I don’t have the gift of evangelism!” God replies through Paul, “... do the work of an evangelist.”¹³ We might say, “I’ll *live* my faith. Others are better at *speaking* about the faith.” It is not either-or. We are to prepare the way for others to come to Christ by our Christ-like living and by talking about Him. We can’t have one without the other and be His faithful servants.

During this season, especially during this season, there will be opportunities to share our personal story of faith. One study showed that 47% of respondents were open to hearing about faith during the Christmas season. Of those 63% said they were open to receive information about a church from a family member or friend, and 56% were open to receive information from the church.¹⁴ There certainly will be opportunities for a few words about Christ and what He and Christmas mean to us.

Like John, we have been selected to serve God to prepare the way for Christ. And, also like him, that service will involve sacrifice. Someone may think, “Sacrifice? Sacrifice in the festive Christmas season? Are you trying to ruin Christmas?” True service, remember,

involves real sacrifice. Sacrifice of my own agenda and priorities for God's. Sacrifice of my own comfort for God's service. Sacrifice patterned after Christ's sacrifice of coming into this world for us, dying for us.

Sacrifice for God means giving up things for Him, but it also brings a great reward. In broad terms, the apostle Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians chapter 4 that

“... momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

(16-18)

You see, to the degree that we look for and follow God's priorities for us rather than our own, including sacrificing and suffering at times, we will gain a *weight of glory, of eternal glory* from God that goes so far beyond the sacrifice that we can't even begin to compare it. We won't know what it is like until we experience it in heaven, but God tells us it will be more, immeasurably more than worth it.

Then in specific terms, the joy of leading people a step closer to Christ, or actually coming to place their faith in Christ is immeasurably greater than any sacrifice we make to do that.

What does sacrifice for serving God in preparing the way for Christ look like for us in this season? Only God and each individual will know. That means that you and I should be asking God what it means for us to be faithfully preparing the way for others to see, hear and know Jesus in these now just over two weeks until Christmas.

Conclusion.

Let's be preparing the way for Christ throughout this season. There is a story of a mother rushing through a shopping mall just before Christmas with her three year-old son in tow. Suddenly she noticed that her son was not holding her hand. In fact, he was no where in sight. She quickly retraced her steps and finally, thankfully, found him with his face pressed up against a store window. When he saw her he shouted, "Look Mom! It's baby Jesus! Baby Jesus in the manger!" She grabbed his hand and headed back to her shopping telling him, "We don't have time for that!"¹⁵

Let's make sure we have time, that we *make* time for one of the greatest and most true joys of Christmas—preparing the way for Jesus to come into the hearts of others, and to transform them forever, as He has transformed us.

As you think about this truth with God now, thank Him that Jesus chose to come into this world for you, that He would have come if you were the only one who needed Him. Thank Him that the gospel came to you, that others prepared the way, that Jesus came into your heart and transformed you. Ask Him to help you serve Him, sacrificially serve Him in these days leading up to Christmas by helping others know about Him, and come to faith in Him. Let's bow our heads and do that now.

¹Luke 1:15.

² Luke 1:17.

³ Luke 1:17.

⁴ e.g. Matthew 14:12; Luke 7:29; John 1:35-42.

⁵ John 1:20; 3:28.

⁶ John 3:29.

⁷ John 3:30.

⁸ John 1:35-37.

⁹ Matthew 14:3-4.

¹⁰ Matthew 14:10.

¹¹ Luke 7:28a.

¹² Luke 7:28.

¹³ 2 Timothy 4:5.

¹⁴ Ed Stezer. "The Christian Post." *Why Share Christ at Christmas?*
<<http://www.christianpost.com/news/why-share-christ-at-christmas-48153/>>.
22 December 2010. Accessed 05 December 2012.

¹⁵ Old story, cited frequently. Original source not known.

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