

“Paving the Way”

Introduction: After a church service one Sunday morning, a little boy suddenly announced to his mother, “Mom, I’ve decided to become a minister when I grow up.” “That’s great sweetheart,” his mother replied. “But what made you decide that?” “Well,” said the little boy, “I have to go to church on Sunday anyway, and I figure it will be a lot more fun to stand up and yell than to sit and listen!”

I don’t know if John the Baptist was yelling, out there in the wilderness, but anyone who starts a sermon by calling their listeners a “brood of vipers,” is certainly setting a forceful tone! Call him the anti-Santa, one commentator offers. At the very least, John wanted to make sure his listeners were there for the right reason. So, what was going on out there, in the wilderness, outside Jerusalem? John was calling his listeners, in every generation, in a sharp and serious way, to stop and assess how they’ve been walking, in order to stay on, or get back on, the road that leads to life.

I. Back to Malachi, and Isaiah

A. To understand John, it’s helpful to begin by going back about 400 years to the prophet Malachi. Malachi is the last book in our OT. His work was composed around 430 BC. At that point, while Israel had been bought back by God from exile in Babylon, and although the temple in Jerusalem had been rebuilt, things weren’t going very well in those years. Israel remained a small, backwater province, ruled over and oppressed by a variety of large empires. As time crept on, in what was known as the Second Temple period, the Jews began to lose hope. Their worship became lackluster, they no longer took God’s law seriously, and injustice was on the rise. Into this malaise, Malachi brought words of warning from God for his people:

So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me, says the LORD Almighty. [Mal. 3:5]

God, Malachi was called to proclaim, had not forgotten or abandoned his people, but was going to come. When he does, however, his people had better be ready.

B. Fortunately, Malachi also brought a word of hope:

See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple. [Mal. 3:1]

God would send a messenger ahead of him to help his people get ready. Luke identifies this messenger as John the Baptist, and describes John’s role in this way:

And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. [Luke 1:17; cf. Mal. 4:5]

This draws from the practice of kings who, when they were checking out various outposts of their kingdom, would send a courier ahead to make sure the roads were passable. Often, some kind of road construction would be needed to allow for the king’s smooth and safe arrival.

C. As he fulfilled this call coming out of Malachi, Luke notes that John would also be fulfilling words from the prophet Isaiah, as a part of the preparation for the Lord's coming:

Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation (Isa. 40:3-5).

Often, when I hear these words from the prophet Isaiah, either spoken, or, as we did last Friday night, sung at a performance of Handel's Messiah, I can't help but think of a time a few years ago when I was driving home from an evening meeting in Needham and I encountered several pockets of road construction. First, the two left lanes were closed, then the right lane, then the middle lane, and then everything was closed except for half the right lane and half the right shoulder. I considered myself lucky to have made it home alive!

No one, with perhaps the exception of those out there working at night and making time and a half while doing so, likes road construction. It's inconvenient, sometimes dangerous, and certainly slows us down. But if we're honest, we know we need it if we are to travel well and smoothly over the long haul, especially with our New England winters.

II. John's Message

A. Importantly, as he draws from Isaiah, John is not talking about what needs to happen on Route 128 or Route 1. He's talking about changes that need to happen in the human heart. He's pointing to the self-centeredness that needs to be filled in, the pride that needs to be leveled, the injustice that needs straightening, and the unrighteousness that needs smoothing, if we are to travel well on the road of life God has set before us.

B. Further, John said to his listeners that their lineage – being a descendant of Abraham – would be no guarantee of God's blessing. There would be no inherited salvation, no favored nation clause or no racial privilege option. If they didn't individually smooth and straighten out their lives, they would be like a bunch of slithering snakes trying to flee an oncoming desert fire. Or they would be like trees which were dead and in need of being cut down. Like government officials who send out warnings to encourage people to leave their homes in the face of floods or forest fires, John wanted these folks to hear him well.

C. Wonderfully, John's audience took him seriously. In light of the coming judgment of God, when all would need to account for their lives lived, they wanted to know what to do. John had several examples for them to take home: If you have more than you need, especially in the realm of clothing and food, share what you have with others. If you are responsible for doing business in some way, do it honestly and don't try to take advantage of others. If you have authority over others in some way, don't use it to oppress them and build yourself up. Stepping back from these examples we can hear John saying that how we care for others is a litmus test of our love for God. If we've truly received the forgiveness and new life that he's come to extend, then it will bear fruit, it will become visible, in how we treat others.

III. Our Response

A. As we listen to John in this advent season, we can't help but recognize that he brings a very counter-cultural message as we prepare for Christmas. Instead of encouraging us to take full advantage of Black Friday sales, and exhausting ourselves by going to as many parties as possible, John invites us to step back into a period of self-examination. How are we walking? Is our love for God revealed in our love for our neighbor? Do we know which path, of the many that are out there, leads to real life? That's where John challenges us.

B. But John also encourages us, if we know where to look.

1. The ax that John warns is at the root of the trees that are not producing good fruit, has been taken by Jesus, on the cross. By his grace, he has taken the punishment for all of our wrong turning, giving us a second chance to turn back and walk in his way.

2. John also, along with others, like Malachi and Isaiah, can remind us that God's ancient promises and puzzling prophecies really do come true, even after long periods of waiting. We may have to wait through a great deal of darkness – through warfare, financial downturns, disappointments, illness, and loss – but God's track record in the darkness is a good one. And, as we take on practices of fairness, integrity, generosity, and contentment, we can pave the way for the reality of the kingdom of God to be among us even now, while we wait for the fullest expression of his kingdom still to come.

As Adele Calhoun has put it, "The practice of living in ways consistent with the values of God's kingdom makes us all prophets who prepare the way of the Lord, not just through our words and prayers, but through our actions."

C. A prayer that touched my heart this past week, coming from the Heidelberg Catechism, highlights the necessity of our actions:

Father, I am weary of all that is wrong with the world—murder of the innocents, a smeared and wrecked creation, tyrant-oppressed poor, hunger-withered children, exploited women, forgotten elderly, invisible homeless. I long to see that all these enemies—yours and mine—will be once and for all, condemned, and all things crooked made straight.

May that making straight begin with us.