

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" It's a familiar Bible verse for many of us, especially if this is not your first Advent in the church. "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." Some of us know a few songs that contain this familiar phrase, Prepare ye the way of the Lord. But actually, the words to that song are originally a quote from the prophet Isaiah, and even as we read them from the gospel of Matthew as we did this morning, it is not John who speaks these words at all—it's rather a narrative description of John himself. In the gospel of Matthew, the first words out of his mouth are these: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

So there we have our two themes for the day, for this second Sunday in Advent is Prepare and Repent. Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. And here to help us with this theme today is none other than John the Baptist, the wildly dressed, crazy-talking prophet, and by all accounts, John the Baptizer was Weird.

John is the original New Testament Weirdo, or maybe the last of the Old Testament Weirdos, or maybe he's a Weirdo bridge from one testament to the next. He's kind of a little of each. He eats nothing but locusts and wild honey, we are told. Okay, maybe that's not so weird anymore, with the whole Paleo diet craze, but we're talking about bugs. He eats bugs and stuff that bugs produce. He doesn't wear regular clothes, he wears camel skins, looking more like a caveman than a prophet of his own time and place. I mean, doesn't this just sound strange to us—a guy who eats bugs, wears animal skins, and runs around the wilderness shouting, literally shouting at people to repent, to change their ways, to prepare for the coming of the Lord? His proclamation is filled with images of cleansing: straightening paths, cutting down useless trees, and burning away chaff. He calls the good pious religious folks of his day hypocrites, or even a brood of vipers, and somewhat counter-intuitively chastises them for actually deciding to do the very thing he telling them to do. "Who warned you to flee from this wrath," he asks. "Well, actually John," they might say, "you did. You just did." Weird, right?

But before we write him off as simply a wild-eyed fanatic, a crazy-man preaching to the world from the outside looking in, we need to know the context: everything the New Testament says about John the Baptizer is code. People back in first Century Palestine, Jewish people who had read their Hebrew bible, who knew the Torah and the Histories and the Books of the Prophets, they would have known the symbolism behind his choice of clothing, behind his choosing to live out in the wilderness, of his choice of words. He was

not some *random* crazy man; he was not some *out-of-nowhere* nutcase. His words, his actions, his dress, his manner, it was all very calculated, all timed. all designed to speak to a particular people at a particular time.

He is the voice, crying in the wilderness, we are told. He is the one about whom the prophet Isaiah was talking. And there, of course, we have a huge clue about John the Baptizer. He looks the way he does, he acts the way he does, he says the things he says because just ahead of the messiah, the anointed one, the chosen one of God, a prophet just like this—someone who looked, acted and sounded just like John, was supposed to appear. That's what the prophets had foreseen. This person, looking, acting, sounding just like John, would be the one to prepare the way for God's messiah.

The voice of one, crying in the wilderness. His voice cries out two messages, even if only one of which has been so easily set to music. "Prepare the way of the Lord," he says, and "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

His words echo the words of the prophet Isaiah. Centuries before John comes on the scene, Isaiah speaks of the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Isaiah speaks of the days that our surely coming, when the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, when the cow and the bear shall graze together, and a little child shall lead them. Isaiah pictures a world that's hard to imagine—where enemies become friends, where oppressor and oppressed are reconciled to one another. Where bitterness gives way to forgiveness, and conflict and retribution are set aside in favor of peace and reconciliation.

The voice of one, crying in the wilderness. Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Prepare the way of the lord. These are all words, phrases, ideas that are so wrapped up into the themes of Advent, into the perpetual themes that don't just come around every year at this time, but that are wrapped up into our very lives of faith as Christians.

As we heard a bit already last week, during Advent, and I would add, throughout our lives, are continually called to get ready—ready to see that God is with us, ready to encounter Christ in our lives, ready to experience the Spirit's empowerment. We are continually called to repent—to turn away from our sinful lives, to turn away from unjust systems in which we are entangled, to turn away from any false gods who claim our attention and allegiance. We are continually called to wait—to wait for the light to dawn, for love to grow, for hope to bloom in our weary world.

These are the words of the voice crying in the wilderness. These are the words of the one preparing God's way. These are the words of the one who goes before Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, in order to be sure that the rest of the people are ready to receive their king.

This past week, the Church lost another of these way-preparers, another of those voices crying out for repentance, whose words and actions over the served to prepare the way for our Lord in many real, concrete ways, whose very ministry over the course of five decades was to proclaim joy to the world, and help all people on earth receive their king.

During a ministry that stretched more than five decades, 36 years of which were right here at Christ the King Lutheran Church, Pastor Paul Olson raised his voice and acted beyond his words to help prepare the way of the Lord. He made a ministry inviting people to true repentance, of turning their lives around, turning them toward God, turning them outward toward God's people and God's creation, all the while making a point in word and deed to point beyond himself to Jesus. Pastor Paul's ministry touched thousands of people, literally knocking on doors to invite folks to worship in the brand new mission start that became Christ the King in 1961, leading this congregation through several stages of growth, several expansions of the building, to be sure, but more so to a deepening and an extending of our ministry reach, while at the same time baptizing marrying and burying so many people from the Christ the King Family, teaching generations of confirmation students, inspiring and equipping lay leaders, mentoring younger pastors, and in so many ways preparing the ground for those—like me—whose ministries would follow after his, upon whose figurative shoulders I now stand, upon the foundation of the congregation he established by the grace of God we can continue to build, develop, and advance our ministry for this generation as well as for generations as yet unborn. No, he was not the wild-eyed fanatic of a prophet like John the Baptist was—although I assume he had at least a few far-fetched ideas over the course of 36 years. No, he did no dress in camels skins and a leather belt, although I understand on at least one occasion his red sneakers peaked out form under his robe after he had hurried to church after a weekend up north. Still, he was a way-preparer like John the Baptist. Like John, the spirit of the Lord rested on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his ministry had an impact that continues to last to this day, nearly 20 years since his retirement from CTK.

In a part of the scripture we didn't read today, John said, clearly and plainly for all to hear. I am not the Messiah but I have been sent to announce his coming. And then, to put it a different way, in speaking of the role he had played and the role Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us would now play, John said, "He must

increase, so I must decrease." John was a prophet, a forerunner, an announcer, a preparer. And while some of his followers wanted to continue on as his disciples, he urged them instead to follow Jesus. He pointed past himself toward the larger good, to the one who was in fact all that John said he himself was not. He must increase, so I must decrease, said John the Baptist about Jesus the messiah.

And now it's our turn. We, too, are being prepared for something today and this season and everyday that we chose to get up and follow Jesus, the Christ, God's own messiah. Some of us have been prepared by such servant-leaders as Paul Olson, others by other pastors, teachers, parents, leaders, mentors, colleagues, friends, and even by complete strangers. This advent is our advent—this waiting, this preparation is our waiting and preparation. The repentance John calls for, the reorienting of our lives towards God's will, towards God's justice, towards one another within the beloved community, that is our repentance, too. Just as John the Baptist's testimony points beyond himself, to Jesus, the Word made flesh, just as Pastor Paul Olson's ministry pointed well beyond himself, beyond this congregation, even beyond the Church writ large towards Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, so we, too, as the people of God in this time and this place, we are continuing to be prepared. We are being guided on our faith journeys as individuals and communities toward a witness that is always and forever pointing to Jesus. We must decrease so that he may increase. After all, it is not about us. It is about God with us. Amen.