

1 Sermon, December 12, 2010

Texts: Luke 1:67-80, Luke 3:1-14

Title: "Holy Preparation"

1. What if your sole role in life was getting ready for someone else?
2. Christian humility – that's precisely what we are doing
3. What's the most important thing you do?
4. What is the most important thing you do?
5. This Christmas, prepare the way

1. What if your sole role in life was getting ready for someone else?

What if the most important thing you did in life was getting ready for someone else?

According to scripture that was John's most important role; getting ready for someone else – preparing the way for Jesus.

If we put together all the historical and Biblical accounts about John the Baptist, we see that he was a man of some authority.

John had a following. People came from many miles away to be baptized by him in the Jordan.

John had followers. It says in John 1:35 that John was with two of his own disciples when he saw Jesus, and said "This is the lamb of God!"

And it appears that John the Baptist was influential enough to worry the Romans & their puppet government, because they had him executed.

Why would a man with that kind of authority, that kind of influence, just bow out and make way for someone else?

But that's exactly what it says in the Bible. Zechariah claimed that John would be a servant of the most high, who would prepare the way for the Master.

In the Gospel of John 3:30, we read John the Baptist saying that "He must increase but I must decrease." John would step back, and let Jesus have the greater following.

And in the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist said, "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

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The whole idea seems unnatural to us. Can you imagine a congressman, just elected out of office, saying: "You know, I tried to do a lot in my term as your representative. But I really think I was just getting ready for the one you've elected instead of me."

Can you imagine a late-night talk show host, when the network has just replaced him with another host, saying, "We had a lot of laughs, but the one they've just picked is a lot better than me. I couldn't hold a candle to him."

The idea of a man in power, whether in business or sports, or even religion, stepping down willingly and pointing to his successor as truly the one you've been waiting for – that's quite shocking.

And I can feel it, too. I want *my* actions to have significance. To think that I might be just preparing the way for someone else is uncomfortable.

2. Christian humility – that's precisely what we are doing

But, as Christians, that is precisely what we are supposed to do. We are supposed to make way for Jesus.

It's not what we do that's important – it's what we allow Christ to do, either through ourselves or through others – that's what really counts. It's humbling, isn't it?

We are like the concrete guy who pours the foundation, but never sees the finished house.

We are like the sous chef who never makes it to head chef, but is always getting stuff ready for the chef to put on the final touch.

We are like the editor who never gets her name in big type, who is never listed as author, but makes the writing of others so much better.

It's what women have been doing for years beyond counting, preparing the way for their husbands to succeed. And now some men are doing the same for their wives.

It may be that the most important thing we do is prepare the way for someone else.

3. A radical concept

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It's a radical concept in this individualistic society.

But if you accept the premise that we are to live in Christian community, and that we each have different gifts to be used for the whole community of faith, then it becomes easier to see.

If we truly believe that it's up to the community, not just an individual, then we can encourage God's gifts in each other. Then we can rejoice in the works of the spirit coming to fruit in someone else. It's not a competition. Instead, it's humbling.

If we truly realize that the most important thing we do may be to prepare the way for someone else, then we can free up some spiritual energy that may have been consumed in worry about whether we had ourselves been doing enough.

This is not just an easy way out: "somebody else will do it, I don't have to." No. It's instead that our efforts can be broadened out so that they encourage and enable others. We may not know what God has called out sister or brother in Christ to do, but we can support them in their calling.

4. What is the most important thing you do?

What is the most important thing you do?

Some of you could honestly answer: "I take care of my husband," or "I take care of my children," or "I spoil my grandchildren."

That would be a beautiful answer. Some could say, "I pray for people," or "I support my church," or "I listen."

The most important thing you do may not be what you spend the most time on. Most people with a regular paycheck don't say that their job is the most important thing they do, unless they talk about it as sustaining life or supporting a family.

The most important thing you do could be to prepare the way for someone else.

5. This Christmas, prepare the way

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We can't prepare the way for Jesus in same way as John the Baptist.

If you got a shack by a river, and invited people to come, get a baptism of repentance, I don't think there would be much response (positive response, anyway).

If you were to proclaim: "You brood of vipers, flee from the wrath to come! Do something to show that you renounce your sin!", people would doubt your sanity.

So I don't recommend John the Baptist's method.

But you can help to prepare the way for Jesus coming in another person.

You can do it by giving to the United Methodist Student Day offering, which actually was last month's special offering.

You can do it by praying that God use us, or raise up leaders among us.

You can do it by encouragement and giving and believing in one another.

You can do it by telling people when you see that they are gifted in a certain area, and God is surely using them.

You can prepare the way for Jesus coming in another person.

One way to do it would be in your conversation around the dinner table at Christmas. You could say to your family: "These are the ways I see God using you," and then list them out.

You could tell your family that you believe in them, and you know that God's love is working in them.

When you're serving up dessert, serve up encouragement, too.

Because the most important thing you do may be to prepare the way for someone else.

Amen.

Luke 1:67-80 (Contemporary English Version)

67The Holy Spirit came upon Zechariah, and he began to speak:

68Praise the Lord, the God of Israel! He has come to save his people. 69Our God has given us a mighty Savior [a] from the family of David his servant.

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70 Long ago the Lord promised by the words of his holy prophets 71 to save us from our enemies and from everyone who hates us.

72 God said he would be kind to our people and keep his sacred promise.

73 He told our ancestor Abraham that he would rescue us from our enemies. Then we could serve him without fear, by being holy and good as long as we live.

76 You, my son, will be called a prophet of God in heaven above. You will go ahead of the Lord to get everything ready for him.

77 You will tell his people that they can be saved when their sins are forgiven.

78 God's love and kindness will shine upon us like the sun that rises in the sky.

79 On us who live in the dark shadow of death this light will shine to guide us into a life of peace.

80 As John grew up, God's Spirit gave him great power. John lived in the desert until the time he was sent to the people of Israel.

Luke 3:1-14 (Contemporary English Version)

1 For fifteen years [a] Emperor Tiberius had ruled that part of the world. Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod [b] was the ruler of Galilee. Herod's brother, Philip, was the ruler in the countries of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was the ruler of Abilene. 2 Annas and Caiaphas were the Jewish high priests. [c] At that time God spoke to Zechariah's son John, who was living in the desert. 3 So John went along the Jordan Valley, telling the people, "Turn back to God and be baptized! Then your sins will be forgiven."

4 Isaiah the prophet wrote about John when he said,

"In the desert someone is shouting,

Get the road ready for the Lord!

Make a straight path for him.

5 Fill up every valley and level every mountain and hill.

Straighten the crooked paths and smooth out the rough roads.

6 Then everyone will see the saving power of God.' "

7 Crowds of people came out to be baptized, but John said to them, "You bunch of snakes! Who warned you to run from the coming judgment? 8 Do something to show that you really have given up your sins. Don't start saying that you belong to Abraham's family. God can turn these stones into children for Abraham. [d] 9 An ax is ready to cut the trees down at their roots. Any tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into a fire." 10 The crowds asked John, "What should we do?"

11 John told them, "If you have two coats, give one to someone who doesn't have any. If you have food, share it with someone else."

12 When tax collectors [e] came to be baptized, they asked John, "Teacher, what should we do?" 13 John told them, "Don't make people pay more than they owe."

14 Some soldiers asked him, "And what about us? What do we have to do?"

John told them, "Don't force people to pay money to make you leave them alone. Be satisfied with your pay."