

**Preparing the Way**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Baptism of the Lord Sunday, 1/10/2016**  
**Luke 3: 15-21**

A Voice cries out in the wilderness:

Prepare the way of the Lord,  
Make his paths straight.  
Every valley shall be filled,  
And every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
And the crooked shall be made straight,  
And the rough ways made smooth;  
And all people shall experience the good things of God.

The author of Second Isaiah wrote many powerful words, but I dare say, none more powerful than these. But Isaiah wrote a lot of words. A lot. In fact, there are 66 chapters in Isaiah's prophecy, and in my Bible, Isaiah takes 85 pages to say all that need's saying.

Even the best words can get lost, buried, forgotten. And sometimes, these good words need to be found, need to be given voice.

In 1963, I would wager that most Americans fancied themselves biblically literate – In fact, folks in our tradition prided themselves on command of scripture. But I can't help but wonder if Isaiah's passage lay hidden.

America was a country plagued with a system of segregation – schools, voting rights, and other common decencies were denied to African Americans; the poverty gap was enormous; and the early consequences of Vietnam were beginning to fester, although it would be several years before most folks noticed. God's world was corroding.

In August of that year, a young prophet named Martin Luther King, Jr. gave voice to Isaiah's words once more: I have a dream.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."

King was asking all Americans, but particularly people of faith, to wake up, to pay attention to what was happening in their world, and to seek to reclaim this world by showing God's love to others. King's speech, and the courageous actions of millions of others propelled the modern day civil rights movement.

For our young people, if you haven't heard this speech, please Google it, and have a listen. King has the kind of voice and presence that will give you goosebumps.

History is filled with tumultuous times, and in every age, prophets with powerful voices emerge to remind God's people that they are still God's people. Unfortunately, there was no YouTube in first-century Palestine. I can't tell you with absolute certainty, but I have a strong hunch that John the Baptist was every bit as much the preacher as Martin Luther King.

Like Martin, John too, lived in a tumultuous world. Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, ruled over Judea, and like his father before him, he was corrupt and vicious and irreverent. Under his watch, officials took bribes, farmers and fisherman were exploited in order to grow Herod's treasury, and religious leaders prioritized power over piety. The whole

sorry system seeped into the masses – it was a world where everyone looked out for their own interests, and ignored the needs of others.

This is the context of today's lection. And this is the setting of John's ministry.

John was a travelling preacher. He roamed the countryside – he wanted to get away from all the muck and messiness of Jerusalem. And out in the country, he invited people to hear God's word anew. Like Martin, John's voice cried out in the wilderness:

Prepare the way of the Lord,  
Make his paths straight.  
Every valley shall be filled,  
And every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
And the crooked shall be made straight,  
And the rough ways made smooth;  
And all people shall experience the good things of God.

The people listened. They came from near and far. And there were goosebumps! And they asked, John, "How can this be so? What is it that we must do?"

John said, "There's no litmus test. God will not give you a checklist."

God is asking you to reorient your life – that is, God wants you to live in a way where you love and care for others, where you long for God's presence to be manifested among all people. This is a lifestyle.

If you have two coats, give your neighbor the one you don't need.

If you have a sandwich, offer half of it to someone who forgot their lunch.

Don't hoard things. Don't take what's not yours. Find happiness in enough-ness.

The people liked this message. "Let's get started!" they said.

As a symbol of this start, John invited them to be baptized in the Jordan River. The people entered the water, washing away a reliance on Herod, on Rome, and other self-serving entities. The people left the waters with a new center – a devotion, a full devotion to a lifestyle committed to God, and to making God's love apparent to others.

And the people couldn't help but wonder, "John, are you the Messiah, the Lord's Leader, that one we've been looking for, waiting for?"

"I am not," John said. "I am just here to get you started. There's another one among us who will offer a baptism much greater than I can offer. He will be filled with God's spirit, and even better, he will help you experience that spirit!"

Like Martin, John's ministry didn't last long. Like the prophet they quoted, neither man would see the fulfillment of his vision. The prophet of Second Isaiah would die in exile. Martin would be assassinated before he could see the mountaintop of civil rights legislation. John would be imprisoned and later beheaded before he could witness firsthand the ministry of the One he announced was coming.

But like the prophet of Second Isaiah, and like Martin, John's vision was fulfilled.

We're not told when, but at some point, Jesus was among those baptized by John.

And I think this is one of the coolest parts of Luke's gospel. Today's text tell us that Jesus was baptized in the way he was born, and in the way he grew – Jesus was baptized among the people, hidden from the limelight.

Too often, we view Jesus' baptism, and our own, as a transaction, a magical cleansing of our sins, some extraordinary event that makes the broken whole.

But for Luke, Jesus' baptism, just like the others in the crowd, was not a transaction. It was a response and a commitment. John said, "Enter these waters. And when you emerge, help prepare the Way of the Lord. Commit yourself to reclaiming God's world as God's world."

But there was power in this act, just as there is power in every baptism.

Baptism is a frame of reference. The waters call us back to our commitment, they remind us of a community that undergirds us, and a God who loves us. And the waters remind us that we are made for God's good purposes. The waters steel us, heal us, and give us resolve for the work ahead.

God's waters gave the prophet of Second Isaiah a voice to speak truth, and a resolve to remain in a land where hope was invisible. The prophet bought barren land whose fruits he would never enjoy. But his descendants would reclaim that land. God's waters gave John a prophet's voice, and a resolve to prepare the way. God's waters gave Martin a voice to illumine a dream, and resolve to keep going, even when death was imminent.

Jesus followed these prophets. Jesus emerged from the Jordan, and he began to pray.

God responded to Jesus' prayer in a miraculous way. Suddenly, the heavens opened up and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the shape of a dove, and God's voice proclaimed: "This is my child, and I am proud of him!!!"

God applauded Jesus for his necessary discernment. Jesus realized that the commitment he was making was not to be taken lightly. This was a permanent reorientation.

Alan Culpepper writes that in being baptized, Jesus devoted himself to being an integer. For those of you who aren't math majors, an integer is a whole number – there is no fractional component.

From his baptism forward, Jesus will fully attune every action, every choice, every moment of his life to God. And Jesus knows this is a commitment that will require God's help.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus will use his baptism as a reminder of his calling. There will be no half-hearted prayers, no quarter acts of kindness, no eighths of mercy. Jesus will figure out a way to be fully present with God in every moment. And because he is fully present, even his most simple acts will help others recognize God's presence: breaking bread with others; listening to strangers; praying for God's guidance; holding a child on his lap; speaking truth when it needs to be voiced.

Sardis Baptist Church, today, 10 January, 2016 is the day of Jesus' baptism. It's the day of Will's baptism. And indeed, it is the day of all our baptisms. It is a day when we are reminded of all the potential God has for this world. We are reminded that we have a part in this plan and a part in this world.

And just like in days of old, a voice cries out, "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

And we respond, "How do we do this?"

The answer: Look to the waters of baptism. For in these waters, there are visions of new lands, and new truths, and new mountaintops, and a new reality: Emmanuel, God with us!!!

But this answer may be overwhelming. For sometimes, God's world seems so far away: lands are still barren, truths seem distorted, mountaintops are fogged over, and fractions feel so much more appealing. There are too many bends to make this crooked path straight.

In those weary moments, take heart. God has given us a community of travelling companions called Sardis Baptist Church, who will support each one of us in times of need and affirm each one of us in times of joy. And there's even better news: God loves each one of us. And God is proud of each one of us. And God is eager to help us prepare the way.

Let's get started!

Amen.