

"PREPARING THE WAY"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
December 6, 1992

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### INTRODUCTION

One cold and recent December Saturday, the two teenage kids of a Professor Long asked to come into this city to do some Christmas shopping. They said, "Dad...the best bargains are in New York City!" And so their father, Dr. Long, agreed to bring his teenagers and several of their friends - six of them in all - on a Saturday shopping trip to this great metropolitan center. He reflects on this trip from the suburbs into the city...

"There they were...six kids marching through the sleet of 42nd Street...wide-eyed with curiosity and wonder, yet trying their best to appear 'cool' and non-chalant".

He was beginning to wonder if this was the best idea after all...to allow these six teenagers from a quiet Long Island town to be here on their own and he goes on to write,

"Just as I was anguishing about the risk I had taken, I heard the voice of a 'preacher'. There behind me on a Times Square street corner was a preacher trying to proclaim the Gospel. His appearance was about what one might have anticipated. His eyes were searching wildly, his urgent voice screeching through a distorted five-watt amplifier, his hands beckoning to the crowds which passed his asphalt pulpit. His message was not entirely lucid, but even in its disconnections you could feel him trying to get his words around a text: 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth....'

Most people, of course, were passing him by. Some stopped for a brief and curious stare. Even the hired Santa Claus positioned a few feet down the pavement paused to listen every now and then. A good many people smiled benevolently as they walked by, a few laughed and one person asked him what he was on....but this street preacher kept right on saying, 'And the WORD become flesh and dwelt among us...full of grace and truth....'"

### JOHN THE BAPTIST

People back then may have looked at John the Baptist in something of the same way the people in Times Square looked at this street preacher. John wore a camel's hair coat with a leather belt around his waist and he ate locusts and honey. His hair was long and unkempt. When the religious officials came out to see him and to be baptized by him, he insulted them by calling them nasty names. Apparently John the Baptist had not read any "church growth" materials sent down to him by denominational executives.

Somehow John the Baptist seems out of place in our celebration of Advent. "'Tis the season to be jolly" as the saying goes. John really isn't someone you would invite to your home for a pre-holiday party. He might liven things up but in the wrong way. And yet, each year on this Second Sunday of Advent, we meet up with John. And his task is to help us get ready for the Messiah. We can not find our way to Bethlehem without the help of this man. John points the way for us. He broods over this season. The people were waiting for John the Baptist or someone like him for over 200 years. Finally he came.

Remember it was the prophet Isaiah who spoke about the One who was to come.

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord...make His paths straight!'"

And John was that man. It was his task to lead people to Jesus, the Messiah. Matthew reports that people from all over Jerusalem and Judea were "going out to him...to hear him". Even the King responded and went out. To him he was something of a curiosity. People were touched by his message as he made an appeal to their conscience. There he was in the desert, "blasting away". Two points.

PREPARE FOR THE MESSIAH BY STRAIGHTENING OUT YOUR LIFE

In the first place, John told the people

to prepare for the Messiah by straightening out their lives. There was a sense of urgency in his message and in this man. "Get with it. Clean up your act". The Christ was coming and they better be ready for Him.

A Florida minister by the name of James Harnish tells about buying a home near a lake in the northern part of the state. It was a house that had been vacant for over a year and nature had taken control. He writes,

"Down at the lakefront right beside the dock, a massive bramblebush had grown. Its long twisting vines totally engulfed the earthbound end of the dock. It was not possible to get past the bush and onto the dock without being snagged by its thorns."

On their first trip the minister and one of his daughters cut the brambles back just enough to get onto the dock. Finally, however, they could no longer postpone the inevitable task of cutting it back. And so they took the clippers and hatchet and began to cut this huge bramblebush down to the ground. When they reached the ground, they discovered an imposing root system. And they hacked and they chopped and they dug it out until they cleared away as much as they could. It was then that they began to realize that they could not get all of the roots out. Several years later, Jim Harnish reflecting on the removal of the bramblebush wrote,

"I know that some of those roots are still there. If I don't take the ax back to it now and then, it will return, trying to regain control of that beautiful shoreline..."

John the Baptist comes to us each year at this time telling us to clear out the overgrown clutter that overtakes our lives, preventing us from being the kind of people that Jesus would have us be. Clearing out our lives is not a "once and done forever" task, but it is something we must do continually to prepare for the coming of Christ. John's call is to "cut back" that which is ensnaring us and to straighten out that which is crooked in our lives, and to smooth out that which is rough...all of this to prepare the way for His coming.

HIS CALL IS FOR DRASTIC CHANGE

More than that...moving on...John the Baptist's call is for drastic change. John's message is quite simple and well to the point. Hear it again,

"Repent...for the Kingdom of heaven has come near."

To repent means to change the direction of our lives. It means to turn our

lives around...to turn back to God. The type of repentance that John spoke about required a radical transformation. To repent means to change our attitudes toward other people from one of suspicion or hatred to one of love and goodwill. Instead of thinking only of ourselves and our needs, we begin to see other people around us. He wants us to change because Jesus will soon be on the scene. It's important for us to hear this.

HIS CALL IS TO AWAKEN US FROM OUR SMUGNESS

And along with all of this goes the call to awaken us

from our own smugness.

I think it's so easy to hear a Biblical word to repent, to change our ways only to think...."well...that really doesn't apply to us, no less to me." We think that the message to repent is meant for "sinners" - not for good, respectable people who come to church. But John's message is for us as much as it is for anyone. Think of it as a "wake up" call to examine ourselves and to shake off that sense of smugness that we carry with us.

Matthew reports that even the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the religious officials of the day, traveled out to the wilderness to see John and even to be baptized by him. I don't think John was that gracious toward them. He called them a "brood of vipers". These were respectable people...people like ourselves. You see John wanted them to see that his message was for them as well as for "the sinners".

A colleague describes the time he was leading a Sunday School class that was studying this passage on John the Baptist. He tells us that he asked for their help.

"After giving some background information and interpretation, I asked the class to give me some help in preparing a sermon on the theme of repentance." He said, "If you were in my place, what would you say to this church about repentance?"

He reported blank, sheepish stares on most faces. One person said,

"We're like the people of John's day...we are so close to it that we cannot hear the message." Another person said, "It's like preaching to the ushers. They're not here...they're elsewhere in the church....in the office, preparing the Sunday offering for deposit..."

Still another put it this way,

"It's like preaching to the choir of which I'm a member. I often miss the message because I'm tuned to hear something else". Yet another said, "Repentance is something we do in the corporate prayer, not something we do in our hearts...."

It reminds me of something William Sloane Coffin once said in a sermon which I've never forgotten for there's much truth in this observation. Here it is:

"The Church" he said, "is full of people who are seeking that which they have already found and only want to become that which they already are. And that's one of the greatest problems we have in the church...."

CLOSING

Who on earth wants some wilderness preacher dressed up in a camel's hair jacket and eating insects and honey to come along and tell us that we have to change our ways - and just two and a half weeks before Christmas? Wouldn't it be far better to start off the New Year making such changes? Why, we could make our New Year's resolutions (and probably forget them after a couple of weeks) - but John's message is for us - TODAY.

John is standing there before us. The appeal of one man's conscience. He even got the King out of his palace. There he is...brooding over this season, half way to Christmas and telling us to "clean up our act and get ready for Jesus". There's something about this strange man that appeals to me. Get rid of the clutter that prevents us from being the kind of people Jesus wants us to be. Make those drastic changes while there's still time. Eliminate that smugness that makes us think the message is for someone else.

As we do this, I believe we'll discover the true meaning of Christmas and end up having the best Christmas ever!

PRAYER

Again, on this Second Sunday of Advent, we hear the voice of John...like a trumpet blast from the desert..."Prepare the way of the Lord and make His paths straight".

O God, You have put a "restlessness" in our hearts and a thirst for You in our very nature, turn us now in the right direction. Give us the grace to realize that there are no easy answers and no shortcuts to our goal. And now as we move toward Christmas, help each of us present to search our own hearts and ask if there be any wrongdoing in the hidden corners of our lives, so that we may be ready to receive the new life He is bringing to us in this Holy Season.

Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your love. Encircle the bereaved with Your warming, healing presence. And point out markers to any person present who may be in danger of losing his or her way. The race is so short, O God, and we would try to run it well, and to Your glory. Amen.

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