

## ***“Make Straight the Paths of Your Heart”***

*A sermon by Dr. J. Matthew Burton, Jr.*

*Central United Methodist Church*

*December 6, 2009*

**(Luke 3:1-6 NRSV)** In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, {2} during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. {3} He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, {4} as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. {5} 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; {6} and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

### **PAVING THE WAY**

One Sunday morning in Charlotte, North Carolina, a man stood up in the balcony of a church and shouted in a loud voice, ***“I have a word from the Lord!”*** Alert and ready ushers immediately sprang work and escorted the man out to the sidewalk.

Dr. Thomas Long, professor of preaching at Candler School of Theology, commenting on this incident says,

***There’s a kind of irony here. Week after week, those of us who preach stand in the pulpit and announce implicitly, ‘I have a word from the Lord.’ No one complains (not usually). No alarmed ushers rush the pulpit to carry us away. But let a stranger stand up in the sanctuary with a word and all decorum breaks loose. An unexpected voice from an unexpected angle.***

***Now, in all probability, the fellow in the balcony was a crank, maybe running a quart or two low on reality. But let’s not miss the point of the story. Maybe, just maybe, the man was Isaiah, with a true and disturbing word from the Lord, or perhaps he was Ezekiel; half crank, half prophet, visionary and eccentric. We’ll never know. The***

*point here is that God's word often comes from the balcony! It surprises us . . . disturbs us . . . embarrasses us . . . coming from places we least expect it. How like our God.<sup>1</sup>*

John the Baptist was one of those Balcony kind of people. He dressed in wild animal skins and ate wild locusts and honey. John the Baptist would stand out in any crowd even in Jesus' day. He was a strange dude and yet, God chose him to announce the coming of the Messiah: ***"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."*** God knew there needed to be preparation before the introduction.

Such was the case when Beverly and I first got together. I often (jokingly) tell people that Beverly was my accompanist for a semester and then decided to accompany me for the rest of my life. But there is more to the story.

There was a time in college before Beverly. We had a class together my freshman year but we didn't really know one another. Beverly decided she was going to get my attention but felt she needed some help. So she enlisted the aid of one of my fellow voice students, Karen. It was exam time and Karen suggested that some of us get together to study for the finals. Arrangements were made and we met in Beverly's dorm room. When I arrived, Karen was there but informed Beverly and I that she had to leave thus leaving Beverly and I alone to study. Someday I'm going to write Karen and thank her for staging the set-up.

The point being that it often takes someone who is willing to pave the way. Sometimes we need a person who is will to go before us, to carry the message, to set the scene, to open the door, to take care of all the preliminary stuff and create a context for response and fulfillment. Think of the people it takes to set the scene so heads of state can come together and not only look good for the media but make important decisions. Think about the clowns in a circus that warm up the audience for the main event in the center ring or the

---

<sup>1</sup>From a sermon preached by Thomas Long at The National Cathedral. [www.nationalcathedral.org](http://www.nationalcathedral.org).

warm-up band that performs on stage before the main attraction. Sometimes estranged persons can be reconciled when there is a go-between who helps to pave the way so persons can meet face to face and come together in order to be reconciled.

John is our prelude to Christmas. He comes and announces the coming Messiah so that we can **REPENT** and **PREPARE** ourselves for God's **SALVATION** made evident in Jesus Christ.

### **REPENT**

John the Baptist reminds us that it all begins with *“Repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”* The problem is that most people would rather relax than repent. They would rather be comfortable than challenged. People have always tried to ease up on human accountability and wanted God's grace to be cheap and easy. The delusion is as old as Adam and Eve. Remember how the snake said to the first couple, *“Relax! Nothing is going to happen to you if you eat from this tree. In fact if you eat this fruit you will be like GOD.”* The same delusion still dupes us today until we want fulfillment without commitment, meaning for life without sacrifice and discipline and redemption without judgment and confession. **C.S. Lewis** reminds us:

*Good and evil both increase at compound interest that is why the little decisions you and I make everyday are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of. An apparently trivial indulgence in lust or in anger today is the loss of a ridge or railway line or bridgehead from which the enemy may launch an attack otherwise impossible.<sup>2</sup>*

John says that if we want to construct a highway so that Christ can truly gain entrance in our hearts, then we need to repent. So what does repent mean? It literally means to *“Turn around.”* If you want to do good in your life and

---

<sup>2</sup>C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001).

increase that good at compound interest, then you have to make sure you are facing in the right direction. The problem that we have with Advent is that we want to face both ways. Advent calls us to face Christ and to prepare ourselves so that every valley can be filled and all mountains made low. We are challenged to face Christ so that the crooked can be made straight and the rough places made smooth.

A Christmas card reminded me that:

*If our greatest need was for information,  
God would have sent an educator.*

*If our greatest need was for technology,  
God would have sent a scientist.*

*If our greatest need was for pleasure,  
God would have sent an entertainer.*

*If our greatest need was for money,  
God would have sent an economist.*

***BUT SINCE OUR GREATEST NEED IS FOR FORGIVENESS,  
GOD SENT A SAVIOR.***

### **PREPARE**

Advent is about preparing for a savior. It's not easy for us to prepare in today's culture. We seem to be built with a predisposition to head in the wrong direction. Nowadays so many things want to pull us the wrong way.

Some of you may know the name Dag Hammarskjold. Hammarskjold was the much-respected Secretary of the United Nations before his death in a plane crash on September 18, 1962. At the time of his death

he was trying to negotiate a peace between United Nations forces and forces in Africa. Experts were sent to see why the plane crashed. Their investigation revealed that the engines were running well on impact. The weather was fair and all other functions of the aircraft were in working order. There was no evidence that the pilot had suffered a heart attack. So what happened?

During that time pilots used what were called “*Approach plates*” which were patterns that gave a heading, altitude, distance from outer markers to the runway, and other important information about a given airport. It was like a template for landing your plane. All a pilot had to do was look at the approach plate or template and know what he needed to do in order to land the plane safely.

The conclusion of the investigating team was that the overworked pilot had used the wrong approach plate. Instead of the approach plate for Endola, Zambia (which was the airport where he was trying to land), he used the approach plate for Endola Congo. There was a fatal altitude difference of 3,000 feet, meaning that the plane flew literally into the ground, short of the runway.<sup>3</sup>

We run ourselves into the ground when we look at the wrong map, adopt the wrong pattern, and emulate the wrong model. We forget that the only plan that will bring us wholeness and true fulfillment is in the Plan of God’s Kingdom. John the Baptist invites us to repent and prepare ourselves to be born anew within. When we do, we can truly see the salvation that Jesus Christ offers to each and every one of us.

## **SALVATION**

I was reading this week about a Catholic church in Washington, D.C. The author of the book said that during the Sunday service, before the time for the passing of the peace (which lasts 10 minutes or more), the

---

<sup>3</sup>Source Unknown.

priest said, *“It would be a shame to leave here without knowing those around us.”* But then he paused and said slowly, *“It would be a much greater shame to leave here without knowing God.”*

It would be a shame to go through the four Sundays of Advent and never meet Jesus. Think about it! In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.