

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 4, 2022  
Matthew 3:1-12

### Prepare the Way

Sing first line of “Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord” (VT 219)

What does it mean to “prepare?” There’s been a lot of preparing this past week at First Mennonite Church. For starters, there was a funeral luncheon in our fellowship hall this past Thursday. It followed the funeral of Vernon Funk, which was held at Trinity Mennonite. This meant that on Wednesday, the tables in Fellowship Hall needed to be set up, and the whole facility cleaned. Thanks to all of you who helped with those preparations.

Then, just yesterday, we were one of the hosts for the City of Hillsboro’s “Down Home Christmas.” A host of area vendors set up their own displays in the fellowship hall. Think of all the preparing that required! Then last night the Etcetera Shop held their staff Christmas Party—guess where—in our fellowship hall. Talk about some quick preparation, in this case involving both tearing down and setting up. Doug Bartel deserves a medal. And maybe a gold watch! (How tired or retired are you, Doug? ☺)

And now, today, the FMC “Youth Group” is hosting a “Christmas Giving Gala.” Guess where? In our fellowship hall! Keep in mind that our youth group, for now at least, is comprised of one youth (Josh Diener), and the two members of our FMC “Nurture Committee,” namely Jan Amstutz and Sue Buchholz. These three have done a whole lot of preparing! The event itself hasn’t happened yet, but we could say that is has “come near.”

Have you noticed how time works in mysterious ways in the season of Advent? Past, present, and future all get jumbled together, mixed up even. Listen to these word phrases from today’s text. “*In those days.*” (Well, which days?) “*The kingdom of heaven has come near.*” (As near as our Christmas Gala?) “*Even now the ax is lying at the root of the tree.*” (Sounds like a threat! How worried should we be?) “*One who is more powerful than I is coming.*” (Leaving all of John the Baptist’s listeners wondering not just who, but when. Today? Anybody see him yet?) “*He will clear his threshing floor . . . and will gather his wheat into the granary . . . but the chaff he will burn.*” (Okay, now Matthew and John both have my attention. Who or what are the wheat, and who are the chaff?)

“*Prepare the way of the Lord.*” Prepare. Make ready. The way of the Lord. And we here in the year 2022 can’t help but wonder. Has the Lord, whoever that is, whoever both Isaiah and John were referring to, come yet? Or is he still to come? Or maybe, come again?

And what does our crazy John the Baptist want us to do to prepare, exactly? At least four things.

**First** and foremost, to prepare means to repent. Be sorry. Confess. Roman Catholics definitely have something, don’t they? Something we need. How often do we stop and take time out to actually confess our sins? Maybe we need to go back to having a confessional booth, and a priest to sit in it. We believe (or say we believe) we don’t need a confessional booth. We can do it anywhere, and anytime. And we don’t even need a priest to absolve us! We have Jesus! But do we ever, actually, get around to it? First of all, how sorry do we feel? Can we actually name our sins, at least some of them? Are we ready to turn around (which is the Greek word for repent literally means)? To make a change?

There is some urgency to this, you know. Even now, the ax is lying at the root of the trees. Wrath is coming.

John's listeners were cut to the quick. They came to him in droves. All the way out into the wilderness. Some Pharisees and Sadducees even came. (And by the way, the Pharisees and Sadducees didn't get along with each other back then. Which is a whole other story. But on this at least, they did agree. They probably needed to repent.)

And there is something significant about being willing to go all the way into the wilderness. Which for us may simply mean recognizing, admitting, when we are in the wilderness. I am. Are you?

**Second**, to prepare the way, for John, means to “*bear fruit worthy of repentance.*” It's not enough to just repent, or feel sorry, or even to turn around. No, we have to actually start walking along the return path. We have to start bearing fruit. Fruit that is consistent with our repentance from sin. This means asking ourselves, all over again, how does God want us to live? How are we falling short? And then, we have to start living that way. In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul did us a huge favor by naming the fruit we're supposed to start bearing. He calls them the “fruit of the spirit.” [*By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Galatians 5:22-23.*] But this morning I simply want to offer my own list: *Practicing humility. Forgiveness. Forbearance. Reconciliation.* And how about *hospitality? Welcome? How about love?* The greatest and sweetest fruit of them all.

**Third**, according to John, to prepare means we *must not presume*. My dictionary says that to presume means “to expect or assume, especially with confidence; to take for granted; to act or proceed presumptuously or on a presumption.” John strongly challenged the Pharisees and Sadducees who were coming for baptism that they not presume to be in God's “inner circle” merely because they claim Abraham as their ancestor—in other words, because of some sense of entitlement. They were not entitled. We are not entitled. No one is entitled. We are, to follow John's illustration, nothing but stones. But if God wants, if God chooses, he can raise up even stones to be his children. The prefix “pre” (and even the word prefix has it) points not to the past or present but to the future (remember how time is all jumbled up in the season of Advent?). “Pre” points not to what we think we already know, but to what we must admit we don't yet know. We could say that John is simply saying “don't get ahead of yourselves.” Don't think you're farther along than you are. And especially, don't try to get ahead of God.

In what ways are we tempted, here at First Mennonite, to presume? To get ahead of ourselves? To get ahead of God?

**Fourth**, finally, and somewhat playfully, part of what it means to prepare in this passage is to take a bath. That's easy. How many of you took a bath or shower this morning? I did. I do it every morning, partly to help me wake up!

But the fact is, I am dirty. We are dirty, all of us, and we need a good washing. For the people coming to John after hearing his prophetic words, this meant being baptized by him in the river Jordan. As a sign. A sign of their repentance, yes, but more than that. A sign of their commitment to do better. And, a sign of their absolute yielding to God.

Let me be clear: we can't wash ourselves. We are too dirty. Only God can wash us. And only when we completely yield ourselves to God.

Let's review. To prepare the way—or rather, to prepare God's way—means first of all to repent. To go find ourselves in the wilderness. To feel genuinely sorry, and to commit ourselves to turning around. To name our own sins—the more often we do this, the better.

Second, to prepare God's way means to start bearing fruit again. Good fruit. Spirit fruit. And we know what that means, what that looks like. We've read the Bible. It's just that it's hard. Bearing good fruit, it would seem, goes against our very human nature.

Third, to prepare the way means to not presume, to not get ahead of ourselves, to not think we're farther along the way than we really are. In fact, it might even mean to start over. As individuals, and as a church. We must allow ourselves to be stones in God's hands, for him to build what he wants, not what we want.

Fourth and finally, to prepare means we must, well, take a bath! Only, we must let God hold the washcloth, because we can't wash ourselves. It's as if we were newborn babies. It means to humbly, and yes publicly, recommit ourselves, yield ourselves to God. And yes, it might even mean having to get all the way naked before one another. Are we ready to do that?

We need to be, we better be, if we want to truly prepare the way of the Lord.

Amen.