

Sermon preached at OCC, 8 December 2024

O God, our guide, set your path clearly before us and lead us to follow you willingly for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord Amen.

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

Prepare the Way of the Lord

In today's reading, Luke lists the names of seven leaders who are either secular politicians or religious leaders. Indeed, they were important people at that time. They are either in charge of big or small regions or religious affairs. Alongside such distinguished company, John is nothing, the son of a small-town priest. He is nowhere, out in the wilderness, where he proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins to prepare the Way of the Lord. Today, we'll think about John's preaching through the metaphor of constructing a road. Then, it will help us understand the theme – prepare the Way of the Lord and its message for us today.

There is a saying that *All roads lead to Rome*. We use this idiom when we express that many methods or ideas can reach the same outcome. This phrase refers to the road system of the Roman Empire, in which Rome was positioned in the centre, with every road attached to it. Roman's way often took directional straightness when it came to road construction. In general, Roman roads went straight up and down hills rather than in a serpentine pattern of roads. Many long sections are ruler-straight. The Roman emphasis on constructing straight roads resulted in steep slopes, impractical for most commercial traffic. Over the years, the Romans realized this and built longer but more manageable alternatives to existing roads. The reading in Luke regarding preparing the Way of the Lord resembles Roman construction in terms of straightness and smooth surface by removing anything to prepare the Way.

In Luke 3:1-6, we see twofold harsh straightness. One is that the seven names of politicians and religious figures¹ at the beginning of the reading appear to be obstacles to preparing the Way of the Lord. In the Advent of the One, John anticipates that paths will be straightened, valleys filled, mountains low, the crooked straight, and the rough smooth. Indeed, all the methods used to make roads to Rome are employed here. But the impact of this proclamation

¹ Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas

reaches every corner of the world (*kosmos*), which is also the world (*oikoumene*: *the inhabited (earth)*) constituted by the political, economic, and religious powers. John's preaching of repentance threatens those who control the present order because John's preaching will turn people away from the powers and lead them to God. As the story unfolds, John is beheaded by one of the rulers, while Jesus will still later be crucified by another. We see that God will send such a messenger like John in Malachi 3:1-4.

Malachi describes the Lord's messenger coming as a refining fire and cleansing soap. This refining process isn't easy. Fire burns away impurities in metal, and soap scrubs away dirt from cloth. Similarly, John's message of repentance challenges people to examine their lives and align with God's ways. Repentance isn't about guilt alone; it's about being purified and reshaped.

Preparing the Lord's path also requires overturning the world as we know it. When Mary is informed by the angel Gabriel about the baby she will give birth to, her known world may have overturned as it is the most scandalous thing for a virgin at that time. Yet, Mary receives the message humbly, although she doesn't understand it much. In Mary's song, she praises God, who saves by dethroning the powerful and exalting the humble, sending the rich away empty-handed and filling the hungry.²

Overturning the world involves all dimensions of life. Jesus blesses the poor, hungry, and weeping but announces woe for the rich and well-fed.³ Preparing for God's arrival means rethinking systems and structures that we see as usual but that God condemns as oppressive and crooked. It means letting God humble everything proud and self-satisfied in us and letting God heal and lift what is broken and beaten down. The claims that the world's authorities make often conflict with God's claims. Paths that seem satisfactory to us are not good enough for God. John calls us to let God's bulldozers reshape the world's social systems and the landscape of our minds and hearts. God's ways are not our ways.

In our storytime, we figured out who John the Baptist was with questions about his lifestyle and actions. In the story, people come to him to be baptized. They ask John how to prepare the Way of the Lord. He gives them simple, straightforward solutions. Those who have two coats must share with anyone who has none. Food must be shared likewise. If you are a

² Luke 1:52-53

³ Luke 6:20-26

politician, soldier, merchant or anything else, live and act according to the law of love. Although they may look simple, it is hard to keep them in practice.

The Way of the Lord we are preparing is unlike any other roads and ways. Malachi and Luke remind us that this preparation isn't an end. It points to something greater – the revealing of God's glory.⁴ The goal of preparing the way is to see God's presence fully revealed in our lives and world. It's not just about individual transformation but about participating in God's cosmic plan to redeem all creation.

Roman roads led to Rome, the centre of imperial power. But the Way of the Lord is entirely different - it leads to God, who comes to dwell among us. This preparation involves being purified and transformed, and this path often overturns worldly systems and reorients us toward God's kingdom. As we journey through Advent, let God's refining fire burn away our impurities. Let God reshape our priorities. And let us prepare a path for God's glory to be revealed in us and through us. Amen.

⁴ Malachi 3:4; Luke 3:6