



Sermon Transcript
December 17, 2017

Advent 2017
Birth Announcements
John the Baptist: Prepare the Way!
Luke 1:57-66

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on December 17, 2017 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Luke 1:57-66

⁵⁷Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, ⁶⁰ but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John." ⁶¹ And they said to her, "None of your relatives is called by this name." ⁶² And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. ⁶³ And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered. ⁶⁴ And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. ⁶⁵ And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, ⁶⁶ and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

Introduction

This is the birth announcement of John the Baptist. He was born to Zechariah and Elizabeth. There are so many fascinating and miraculous details surrounding his birth, that in verse 66 people were left pondering, *“What then will this child be?”* The details surrounding his birth were of such that you had to conclude, like our passage concludes, *“For the hand of the Lord was with him.”* There was something special about John the Baptist. John the Baptist had a unique calling of God on his life.

This calling of God on John the Baptist’s life was made evident from the very beginning of his story. Early in Luke 1, we discover that his father, Zechariah, was a priest and that he was chosen to go into the temple to burn incense on the altar. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity and it brought him within close proximity to the Holy of Holies, that curtain that housed the inner chamber that could only be entered into once a year on the Day of Atonement by the high priest. This was the room that represented the throne room of God. Joel Green says, “this would bring Zechariah as close to the presence of God as any person other than the high priest might ever come. Many priests might never experience this honor, and it was forever out of the reach of non-priests.”¹ One can only imagine the wonder that filled Zechariah as he entered the sanctuary.

It was here that an angel appeared to him. As you can imagine, quite naturally, he was startled and afraid. But the angel came to tell Zechariah that he and his wife, Elizabeth, were going to give birth to a son. But this baby boy wasn’t going to be just any son. The boy who would be born to them was going to be used of God in a special way. In verses 16-17 we learn that *“he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to children . . . to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”*

There is a lot for Zechariah to process here. First of all, there is an angel standing in front of him. Secondly, if he had time to process what the angel was saying to him, he would know that the angel is using words from the end of Malachi, the very last book of the Old Testament. In fact, this is how the Old Testament ends. It ends with the promise of the coming of Elijah the prophet and it says in the very last verse of the Old Testament, *“And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children.”* Earlier in Malachi 3, God speaks of a day when *“Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me.”* The angel is clearly alluding to these Old Testament prophecies made 400 years earlier and now they are coming to fruition through the announcement that Zechariah’s son would be the answer to these prophecies.

But I don't think that really registered at all with Zechariah. He couldn't get past the idea that he and Elizabeth were going to have a baby. This had long been their prayer, but now they were well beyond the years of having children. And so with a tinge of doubt, Zechariah said to the angel, *"How shall I know this, for I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."* To which the angel says, *"I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and bring you this good news."* Because of Zechariah's doubt, he was unable to speak until the baby was born. That would, no doubt, give him plenty of time to ponder the meaning of the words he heard from the angel and the calling placed on his son.

And so we read this morning of the birth announcement of John the Baptist. From the time the angel appeared to Zechariah to the time their newborn son was presented to be circumcised, Zechariah was unable to talk. But the moment he named his son John, as he was instructed in verse 13, his voice returned to him and it was here the people were left to ponder of John the Baptist, *"What then will this child be?"*

The story of the birth of John the Baptist reminds me a lot of the story we looked at last week with the birth announcement of Samuel. Similar to our story this morning, Hannah had been unable to conceive. She cried out to God and God heard her prayer and she gave birth to Samuel. We noted last week that the reason we have a detailed account of the birth of Samuel and his hearing God's voice while serving God in the temple was to demonstrate that he was God's instrument to anoint God's king, David, for God's people. So it is with John the Baptist. His story demonstrates that he was God's chosen instrument to identify Jesus as Israel's Messiah, the Savior of the world.

It is John the Baptist who would point to Jesus and say, *"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."* It is John the Baptist who said of Jesus, *"He must increase, but I must decrease."* It is John the Baptist who said of Jesus, *"I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."* John, the author of the Gospel of John, said about John the Baptist, *"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light."* No doubt, we too must conclude that *"the hand of the Lord was with him."*

Prepare the Way

The phrase that is closely tied to John the Baptist is the phrase *"prepare the way."* We

already heard in the announcement to Zechariah by the angel, Gabriel, that John would “*make ready for the Lord a people prepared.*” After Zechariah’s mouth is opened, in his prayer of thanksgiving he says of his son, “*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.*” In Luke 3 when we see John fulfill his ministry calling, his ministry is defined by the words of Isaiah the prophet who said, “*The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*” And when Jesus looks back on John’s ministry in Luke 7 he too associates John the Baptist’s ministry as that of a messenger “*who will prepare your way before you.*” And so John the Baptist is the forerunner to Jesus and he has come to prepare the way for Jesus.

This morning I want us to think about his idea of “preparing the way.” I want to ask three questions this morning. Why? How? And What? Why did John the Baptist need to prepare the way for Jesus? How did John the Baptist prepare the way for Jesus? What is “the way” he prepared?

I think this is a very opportune time for us to be asking these three questions. We are just one week away from Christmas. This entire month is filled with all kinds of “preparations.” Presents are being bought. Food is being stock-piled in large quantities. More cookies are being baked and exchanged that can possibly be consumed in a month. Family gatherings are being planned. Cards are being sent. Parties are being held. All these things are good things and they require a measure of preparation.

But it is good this morning to be reminded that spiritual preparation is also needed for this time of year as well. It would be unfortunate if you showed up on Christmas Eve Day and this was the first time you paused to prepare your heart to take in the Christ child. That is one of the reasons why a month of Advent is good. It causes us to pause and spiritually prepare. That is where we are going to land this morning at the end of the sermon as we consider that last questions, “What is ‘the way’ he prepared?” But we will also see that it is more than just preparing for a holiday. It is much bigger than that. We have been “prepared” for a “way” of life.

Why Did John Prepare the Way?

We begin this morning with the first question of “Why?” Why was John sent to prepare the way for Jesus? Let me give an answer to that question and then we will unpack it as we move forward. The reason John was sent to prepare the way for Jesus is because God was about to do something that was very big. A pivotal moment in the grand narrative

of God was about to take place and it would change everything.

In order to explain why John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus, Luke connects the ministry of John the Baptist to what was prophesied in Isaiah. In Luke 3:4-6, Luke assures us that the ministry of John the Baptist was foretold by the prophets. He explains the ministry of John the Baptist by saying, *“As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘The voice of one crying 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 become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”*

This is a quote from Isaiah 40 and it is a very important chapter in the Old Testament book of Isaiah. If you were going to divide the book of Isaiah into half, the first half would be the first thirty-nine chapters and the second half would start with Isaiah 40. In fact the entire tone of the book changes with Isaiah 40. Up to this point in the book of Isaiah, God was laying out his case against his people for not trusting God and how this would lead to their judgment. That is exactly how Isaiah 39 ends. It ends with the promise that in the very near future the entire nation would crumble and God’s people would be carted off into captivity in Babylon.

But then, with the very first words of Isaiah 40, the entire tone of the book changes. It is a tone of hope. This second half of the book that stretches all the way to the end of the book in Isaiah 66 begins with these words, *“Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”* It is the very next verse in Isaiah 40:3 where we read what Luke quotes to explain the coming of John the Baptist, *“A voice cries in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.”*

What is happening here? John Oswalt, in his commentary on Isaiah helps us understand what is happening here when he asks, “How is it that comfort can be offered to a sinful, ruined people?” He poses several options. “Is it that they will have suffered enough to cancel out those earlier sins?” In other words, “Does Israel somehow save herself?” To which Oswalt responds by saying, “Hardly!” “Neither Israel or any other human agency is the cause of the comfort here extended. It is the coming of God, the revelation of him in human sight . . . Israel’s only hope is God breaking into human history.”²

Do you remember the scene when Joseph and Mary bring the baby Jesus to the temple?

It was here where they encountered an elderly devout man of faith by the name of Simeon? It says of Simeon that he was *“waiting for the consolation of Israel.”* That is the “comfort” Isaiah is speaking about. Then holding the baby Jesus, he says, *“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”* In Jesus, God and God’s comfort, his consolation, has broken into human history bringing us forgiveness of sin.

And so in Isaiah 40:1-11 you have the introduction to a portion in Isaiah that takes you all the way to Isaiah 55. It is in these chapters that we hear about a coming “servant” who will not only deliver the people of Israel but will also bring blessing to the nations. I love what it says of this coming “servant” in Isaiah 49:6, *“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation shall reach the end of the earth.”* And of course it is here, in Isaiah 53, we read of the coming “suffering servant” who was *“wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.”* Again, we find ourselves being brought to Jesus.

So when Luke quotes Isaiah 40 to explain the ministry of John the Baptist, it is too small of a thing to say that this passage only points to the coming of John the Baptist. It is also not even enough to say that this passage tells us that the promised “servant” Jesus has come. Rather, this is a passage that tells us God is doing something really big. It tells us that the long awaited day has come. God is breaking into human history in the person of Jesus. Isaiah 43:19 adds, *“Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”*

Isaiah spoke of this future coming day about 800 years before the time of Jesus. Malachi, the last prophetic voice of the Old Testament, spoke of this coming day being introduced through a prophet who would come in the spirit of Elijah. Even Malachi spoke about this promise about 400 years before the time of Jesus. And for the next 400 years there was no voice that spoke from God. These years between the Old and New Testament are called “the 400 silent years” because there was no prophet and no revelation from God during that time. Over that long span of time, conditions hadn’t changed much for the nation of Israel. During the time of Isaiah they were heading into Babylonian captivity and now, at the dawn of the New Testament, they were under Roman captivity. They longed for a deliverer. The sky was dark and there was seemingly no ray of hope.

But then, John the Baptist burst onto this dark scene where there had been no revelation and no prophetic voice for 400 years. Zechariah describes the birth of his son in Luke 1:78-79 by saying *“because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”* I like the way Bob Deffinbaugh illustrates the breaking forth of John the Baptist onto the scene of redemptive history. He writes, “One morning recently I was coming back from an early prayer time that I spend with two other friends. It was around 7:00 or 7:15. The sun was not yet out, and it was still a little dark. . Then I went over an overpass which is three levels high, at least 50 feet from the ground. As I faced to the east, I saw the sky bright red, like the whole thing was on fire. It was one of those spectacular sights that we see once in a while. That’s how it was in the coming of John the Baptist. It was like an emblazoned bright shining sky that gave an unambiguous indication of the sunrise.”³ With the coming of John the Baptist, a ray of light has dawned and God was breaking into human history.

Looking back on the ministry of John the Baptist, Jesus said in Luke 7:28, *“I tell you, among those born of women, none is greater than John.”* What did Jesus mean by that? What made John “so great” was his close proximity to Jesus. He was the last of a long line of prophets that spoke of the coming day when God would pour out his favor on this broken world. And John was the one who got to say, “here he is.”

But then in the next breath, Jesus says, *“Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”* When Jesus refers to *“the least of these”* he is talking about you and me. It is a way he refers to his disciples, who humbly turn in faith to receive him. The reason we are “greater” than John the Baptist is because by faith in Jesus we enter the promised kingdom of God that the prophets, including John the Baptist, longed for and spoke about. Through the ministry of John the Baptist, he points to Jesus to tell us that the day of God’s favor, the forgiveness of sin and the making of a new people of God, Jew and Gentile, the pouring out of his Spirit has come. So here we are. As we gather this morning, all over this world, God’s people gather to proclaim the “comfort” and the hope we have in Jesus. So the reason why John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord is to announce that this long anticipated day has dawned in the coming of Jesus and God has broken into this world and into our broken lives and has made us new.

How Did John Prepare the Way?

This leads us to our second question this morning. How did John prepare the way? The ministry of John the Baptist is summarized in Luke 3:3, *“And he went into all the region*

around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” He preached a message of repentance. He called people to repent of their sin. It didn’t matter who you were or what you did, the message was the same. “Repent!” To repent means to turn from sin and turn to what is right and good.

All kinds of people came out to the “wilderness” to hear John the Baptist. The average person came out to hear John and when they asked him what they should do in keeping with repentance, they were told to share with others what they had. Tax collectors came out and were called to repent and in doing so they were told to not take more than what they were authorized to take. Roman soldiers were called to repent and they too were told to not abuse their power by extorting money or by making false accusations. Many of them responded to Joh’s message of repentance and they were baptized.

John the Baptist even called the religious leaders to repent of their sin. They thought they were safe with God because of their religious pedigree, they were descendants of Abraham. And yet, John the Baptist called them a “*brood of vipers.*” In other words, like a poisonous snake, they were hostile to life, or possibly worse yet, he associated them with the serpent found in the Garden of Eden and later pictured in Revelation 12:9, “*the ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan.*” That would get your attention. He did the same thing with King Herod when he confronted the king for his unlawful marriage to his brother’s wife. This landed him in jail and eventually led to his execution. So some repented and some rejected John the Baptist’s ministry.

Either way, how to prepare for the coming of Jesus was made plain. They were to repent of their sin and it didn’t matter who you were or where you came from. The message is universal. If you want to prepare to meet Jesus, you need to repent of your sin. That is what the prophet is getting at when he says of John, “*Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight and the rough places shall become level ways.*” That is what repentance does. It removes the obstacles that keep us from God and they make a way ready to come to Jesus.

The prayer of repentance is not a one and done prayer. It is an ongoing posture that we humbly take before God. This is instructive for us. How can you prepare this Advent Season to come and meet afresh the Christ-child? John Piper makes this recommendation, “Meditate on the fact that we need a *savior*. Christmas is an indictment before it becomes a delight. It will not have its intended effect until we feel desperately the need for a Savior. . . Engage in sober self-examination. . . “*Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any wicked*

way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” Let every heart *prepare him room...by cleaning house.*”⁴ It is reminder to daily pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, “*forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.*” This is how you prepare a heart to meet Jesus. There is no meeting of Jesus apart from repenting of your sin. Again, we are confronted with the truth we have meditated on this Advent Season, “God is glorified when we acknowledge our need for him.” And so we cry, “God have mercy on me, a sinner.”

What is “the Way” John Prepared

My final thought this morning about the ministry of John the Baptist is something I never saw before when it came to the ministry of John the Baptist. This point was highlighted in two of the resources I used in putting this sermon together and I think it is instructive for us this morning as we seek to be a people made ready and prepared.

Luke is the one who gives us the details behind the birth of John the Baptist. We already noted the several verses in Luke where John the Baptist’s ministry is described as “*preparing the way.*” And so John the Baptist comes to announce that the long anticipated day of God’s favor has come, the kingdom of God has come in the person of Jesus. And so he “*prepares the way*” by calling people to make ready their hearts.

Luke also writes the book of Acts which unfolds the second volume of the work of Christ in this world as the kingdom of God spreads through his church. It describes for us how the kingdom of God spreads through the preaching of Christ crucified and risen from the dead. It is not incidental nor is accidental that the followers of Jesus in the book of Acts are referred to as “*the Way.*” in Acts 9:2 we read of Saul rounding up Christians to persecute them and it says, “*if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them in bound to Jerusalem.*” On five other occasions in the book of Acts, the followers of Jesus are referred to as “*the Way.*” Joel Green says of this term that it is “the designation of a people who align themselves with and serve God’s salvific aim.”⁵ In other words, we now stand in the tradition of John the Baptist and not only do we repent of our sin, but we proclaim the message of Jesus to a lost and hurting world as we too call people to repent of their sin and turn in faith to Jesus.

So what is “the Way” John prepared for us? It is a “way of life” that goes and tells others that God has broken into human history in the person of Jesus and that when you repent of your sin and turn in faith to Jesus, who died for you, you can come to know salvation and peace.

Conclusion

There are a series of short videos called “Meet the Nativity.”⁶ They are four minute dramas of a contemporary family who one by one have an encounter with the baby Jesus. One by one, they discover that out in the pool house is the real live nativity: Joseph, Mary, the shepherds . . . And of course the baby Jesus. In the third episode the step mother is very anxious as she is getting the house set up for the pastor coming over for Christmas dinner. The tipping point came when she dropped some of the china on the kitchen floor and it shattered. Her husband came to help her clean it up and she was short with him and so he just left the room. Then the step daughter came in and she had already had an encounter with the baby Jesus in the pool house. She calmly got on her knees to help her step mother and then gently and lovingly put her hand on her step mother’s hand as if to express compassion. And then she said, “Come with me, I want to show you something.” She took her step mother out to the pool house and told her to go inside.

The step mother went inside the pool house, and to her surprise, there was a shepherd “babysitting” the baby Jesus while Joseph and Mary had gone into town. He was relieved because he thought she was his relief. Slowly, you could see her come to realize who this baby was and when the shepherd offered the baby Jesus to her, she initially shied away and held out her hands and said, with a whisper of shame, “my hands are dirty.” The shepherd said, “Oh don’t worry, he doesn’t mind” and he handed her the baby Jesus. As she stared into the baby’s face, the shepherd said, “he likes you.” Looking into the face of Jesus, she said, “welcome to the mess.” As the video came to a close, she met her step daughter outside of the pool house and her countenance was changed and for the first time she encouraged her step daughter to call her “mom.”

That is “the way” prepared for us in Jesus. We come with dirty hands, but we come reaching out to Jesus humbly repenting. And we don’t just go to “the pool house” once to meet with Jesus. We go daily. That is how we prepare ourselves to meet with Jesus. And then, when we really meet with him, he changes us and we bring others to encounter Jesus and his love. Why? Because God has done a really big thing with Jesus. He has brought his salvation to us. How? By simply holding out our hands and acknowledging they are dirty and receiving Jesus by faith. What? Aligning ourselves with God’s purposes and taking our hands and with great compassion saying to others, “Come with me, I want to show you something.” And in the spirit of John the Baptist, we show them Jesus, the crucified and risen one!

¹Joel Green *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 70

²John Oswalt *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 50-51

³Bob Deffinbaugh “The Forerunner of Jesus, John the Baptist” www.bible.org

⁴John Piper “Prepare the Way of the Lord” desiringgod.org November 25, 1985

⁵Green, 172

⁶<https://meetthenativity.com/>

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