

December 1, 2024

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

Title: "A Voice Calls in the Wilderness"

Priorities. What are your priorities these days? A woman was taking her time browsing through a yard sale. She said to the homeowner, "My husband is going to be very angry when he finds out I stopped at your yard sale." The homeowner said, "I'm sure he'll understand when you tell him about all the bargains you found." "Normally, yes," the woman said. "But he just broke his leg, and he's waiting for me to take him to the emergency room to have it set." I think we can guess this woman's priority.

Our lesson for today takes us to a man who believed he had one priority, one mission in life, and that was to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus. I'm talking about John the Baptist of course. And to get right to the point, **John's priority is also our task--to prepare the world for Christ.** It's easy for us to agree but then we are distracted so easily, all the time, but even more so at this very religious time of the year. So how do we prepare ourselves for Christ let along the world?

"In ancient times," says Jeremy Myers, "when a king was going to visit a city, he would send before him someone to herald his coming...The herald would go around the city, and go before the leaders of the city, telling them, 'The king is coming. He'll be here any day. So clean up your lives. Make sure you are in obedience to the king's commands so that you won't get in trouble with him when he arrives.'

“This herald also served as a kind of city inspector. He’d go around making a list of things that needed to be fixed and he’d tell them, ‘Sweep your streets. Pick up the garbage. Round up the criminals. Fix the roads; make them smooth and straight. Make sure the city’s fit for a king to ride through.’ “It was embarrassing for that city if they weren’t prepared when the king came. And you didn’t want to insult the king.

In the same way John the Baptist came to announce the coming of a different kind of king. “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.” Dr. Ralph F. Wilson tells about the effort it took to straighten a highway in Southern California years ago, the old highway 99. An old deacon told Wilson that when he was young it took him two full days to drive a large truck only 110 miles from Los Angeles to Bakersfield, CA. As the road climbed the steep mountains he would have to shift to low gear and crawl up the slope. When the road descended into deep canyons on the other side he would have to shift into low gear again and ride the brakes in order to keep the heavy truck from careening off the narrow road.

But when they turned it into an Interstate in the 70’s, they had to level it out, cutting the inclines and taking that dirt and filling in the valleys. “Whenever I drive this stretch of road now, I think of John the Baptist’s mission of preparation and of God’s working in my life to make me a fit disciple of Jesus. God is seeking to prepare you and me. To cut through the mountains of our pride, to fill up the valleys of our fears and our despair, to deal with our hypocrisy and make us fit for

the King himself to travel upon.”

**How were the people to prepare themselves for the coming Christ according to John the Baptist?** They were to repent of their sins. “He (John) went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Repentance is a difficult word to tie to Christmas, isn’t it? Christmas is a warm and fuzzy time of the year. Repentance, on the other hand, is one of the harder concepts of our faith. It’s hard, we tend to not be to self-aware. Others see our shortcomings while we don’t. So much pain and sorrow we go through because of our shortcomings that we don’t or won’t take ownership of. And on a larger scale, our society as a whole doesn’t easily recognize its shortcoming either...the sins of violence against others in the home, on the streets, and around the world, the sins of demonizing people who aren’t like us. **Could it be that we are in greater need of a baptism of repentance than we might imagine?**

So as we prepare our homes for Christmas, let’s not forget to prepare our hearts. As we’re hanging up lights, let’s not ignore the darkness in our own lives--the darkness of strained relationships, of moral weakness, of anger, hopelessness and fear. **The King is coming. Prepare, ye, the way. Amen.**