

Preparing the Way
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15:16

John the Baptist is probably one of the strangest figures in the Bible. He went out into the wilderness on his own, preaching to anyone who would come out to see and hear him. He wore clothes made out of camel hair and ate locusts with wild honey. John told people to repent and he baptized them in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins to this prophet in the desert.

This morning I want to explore how exactly John blazed the way for Jesus, how did he "prepare the way of the Lord?"[1] And I also want to think about his message of "repentance for the forgiveness of sins." [2] What was all this business about calling people to repent and be baptized really about?

To lay it all out there, John the Baptist was incredibly eccentric and may have even been a little bit crazy. We've heard that sometimes there's a thin line between genius and insanity and John probably went back and forth across that line many times. But I think that he knew exactly what he was doing because we've also probably all heard Albert Einstein's famous quote about insanity, that it's "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

So by that definition, John doesn't seem insane at all. Because he did things differently, he knew that he had an important job to do—he had to prepare the way for the Lord and so his tactics reflected this unique assignment. He didn't do the same things as other messengers. John was that "voice of one crying out in the wilderness." And we have to give him credit—he accomplished his mission with some style and flair, he was a memorable character and probably incredibly dynamic for all those people to flock to hear him out in the middle of nowhere.

People like John see the world in a new perspective. And in some ways, because of John's eccentric nature and his perhaps extreme tactics and lifestyle, people may have even taken to Jesus' message easier. They might have thought—well at least this Jesus character isn't as crazy as his lunatic, locust-eating, camel-hide wearing cousin John the Baptist!

This pattern happens a lot throughout history. It seems like many social movements have extremists and sometimes they end up paving the way for the less extreme leader to come. The extremist may perhaps allow people to see the more moderate social mover and shaker as a less risky leader. These trail blazers make it easier for the "prophet" because they seem like sane, rational people in comparison to trouble makers who may dance across that line of genius and insanity.

I was actually thinking of the women's rights movement in our country and how this is exactly how the 19th Amendment came to be passed in 1920. You had Carrie Chapman Catt, the president of the National American Women's Suffrage Association and then you had Alice Paul, who ended up breaking away with some of her closest allies and forming the National Women's Party, quite frankly after Paul was exposed to some of the more extreme tactics used by British suffragettes.

Carrie Chapman Catt and Alice Paul both had the goal of universal suffrage for women, but they had very different ways they wanted to go about achieving that goal. NAWSA wanted to

go state by state and the National Women's Party wanted to focus 100% of their time and energy on having a national amendment.

Paul was the more radical of the two women's rights leaders. She organized "Silent Sentinels" to picket the White House and even remained there during World War I, which made these women get labeled as "unpatriotic" by those who disagreed with their position. Angry mobs attacked them, and they eventually were arrested on trumped up charges of obstructing traffic and taken to jail when they refused to pay their fines.

These women's rights leaders ended up being sent to a prison in Virginia and that's where everything changed. Paul and some of the other women staged hunger strikes and eventually were force-fed in brutal ways. Alice Paul was even removed and placed in a sanitarium with some officials hoping that she would be declared insane and that declaration would damage her reputation and the whole suffrage movement in general.

But the press found out about the horrible treatment of these women—the cold, dark, rat infested prison cells, the beatings of frail older women's rights leaders, and the harsh force feedings. Consequently, the public found out too, and then there were demands made for these suffragettes to be released and sympathy for the prisoners ended up positively influencing the way people viewed the push for women having the right to vote. And we all know the end result, the 19th Amendment was eventually passed and these women's rights activists achieved the 3/4th ratification of the states that they needed in 1920.[3]

It always takes a spark to get a fire going. When you think about movements for change, it seems that in retrospect certain people are trailblazers and help lead the way. Sometimes those trailblazers can be a bit fanatical, a bit odd—sometimes they can be divisive figures, but it happens over and over again. Carrie Chapman Catt had Alice Paul. Robert the Bruce had William Wallace. Abraham Lincoln had John Brown. Martin Luther King Jr. had Malcolm X. Jesus Christ had John the Baptist. In these cases and probably so many more, the movement for change needed both the radical element and the more moderate element to succeed. John the Baptist and his crazy ways seemed to influence Jesus and help him spread his message of loving God with our entire beings and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

We hopefully know Jesus' message of love pretty well, but what was John's message all about? Most of the accounts of John have him almost raving like a lunatic in the wilderness, declaring that people need to repent, repent! In Luke, John the Baptist tells the crowds, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance." [4] John wanted the crowds to turn from their sinful ways. A baptism of repentance in the Jewish context of the time was a specific ritual of cleansing that signified a return to God with the expectation that the repentant person would be forgiven. [5] Their bodies and their hearts would come away from that cleansing renewed, and all was forgiven by the merciful God who provides constant comfort to God's beloved people. But it was also the expectation that this sincere repentance for sins and unjust past actions would fundamentally change who you are and how you behaved in the future.

That's why Luke's fuller analysis of what John the Baptist was doing in the desert, and how specifically he wanted people to repent includes groups of people and what they need to start doing. John addresses the general crowds, tax collectors, and soldiers, telling each group how they should be acting. John tells the crowds, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." He tells the tax collectors "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." And he tells the soldiers, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." [6] In all of these ways, their just actions would prove that they really did repent; they really did turn away from unjust practices of exploitation.

And this is part of what Advent is all about—that's why some people even call Advent "little Lent." Edward Hays in *A Pilgrim's Almanac* relates that, "Advent is the perfect time to clear and prepare the Way. Advent is a winter training camp for those who desire peace. By reflection and prayer, by reading and meditation, we can make our hearts a place where a blessing of peace would desire to abide and where the birth of the Prince of Peace might take place." [7]

And just like John the Baptist outlining what the crowds need to repent in the first place and how they need to change their ways, Hays outlines some of the questions we should be asking ourselves during this time that we are preparing for the arrival of Jesus Christ into our midst. He says, "Daily we can make an Advent examination. Are there any feelings of discrimination toward race, sex, or religion? Is there a lingering resentment, an unforgiven injury living in our hearts? Do we look down upon others of lesser social standing or educational achievement? Are we generous with the gifts that have been given to us, seeing ourselves as their stewards and not their owners? Are we reverent of others, their ideas and needs, and of creation? These and other questions become Advent lights by which we may search the deep, dark corners of our hearts." [8]

As we prepare the way individually for the coming of the Christ-child, as the nights get longer, and somehow we may feel more reflective, as soon enough 2011 will be coming to an end, it's important that we examine our inner landscapes. It's important that we repent for some of the unsettling things that we may have done or left undone this year, always grounded in the knowledge that God will be there to lift us up to the light and take us back into the fold.

But repentance, real repentance like John the Baptist taught, should make us feel lighter, less burdened, full of hope—with peace in our hearts. John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus and for us, to make a change for the better. It's just like Frederick Buechner once said, "True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry,' than to the future and saying, 'Wow!'" May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] Isaiah 40:3

[2] Mark 1:4

[3] <http://www.alicepaul.org/alicep3.htm>

[4] Luke 3:7-8

[5] Footnote Luke 3:3 in the Harper Collins Study Bible.

[6] Luke 3:10-14.

[7] Edward Hays, *An Advent Examination* in *A Pilgrim's Almanac*, 196.

[8] Edward Hays, *An Advent Examination* in *A Pilgrim's Almanac*, 196