

Prepare the Way of the Lord

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, fulfilling the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

“Prepare the way of the Lord”—that was the whole message, the whole purpose, the whole reason-for-being of John’s ministry. Everything John did was centered around the single work of preparing the place where God’s Holy One could be revealed. Nothing about John mattered as an end in itself; everything about John was done to prepare the way for Christ.

There is a painting of John the Baptist that was done by Matthias Grünewald in about 1515 for an altarpiece for a church in Isenheim, Germany—and in that painting John stands there with a finger extended, pointing to Jesus. That’s all John does; the figure of John has virtually no other eye-catching characteristics, other than that one pointing finger; and the finger itself seems unusually long, as if pointing was the only thing it was ever meant to do. John’s whole purpose, in the entire composition of that painting, is to point the way to Jesus.

In a way, that reminds me of a Taoist saying, that religion is like a finger pointing at the moon. You need to look at the finger in order to draw your attention to the moon; but if you never look past the finger to see the moon, then you end up missing the point. John the baptizer’s religious message was like a finger pointing to Jesus. It was necessary for John to prepare the way; but the point was to be ready for Jesus.

And in that respect, I think we the church today are exactly like John the baptizer back then. We the church exist for one reason and for one reason only: to prepare the way of the Lord, to point attention to Jesus, to create the conditions where people can come to know and feel and experience a relationship with Jesus which can transform their hearts and their societies and their worlds. That’s it. That’s the only thing we as a church ever have to do. And if we ever start doing anything other than that, then we start missing the point.

But if pointing to Jesus is the one thing we have to do, then we must also admit we do that one thing in many different ways. Jesus can mean many different things to many different people, and experiencing a relationship with Jesus can take many different forms.

For some people Jesus is a great moral teacher, an example of the ethical life. For some people Jesus is an important historical figure, someone who had a lasting impact on the world. For some people Jesus is a kind of superman, the supernatural Son of God who looked like us but could read people’s minds and foretell the future and never had any doubts and never had any questions and always knew exactly what God wanted all the time. For some people Jesus is the Child born at Bethlehem, who brings people and animals and even angels together in peace around his promise of New Birth. For some people Jesus is a figure of gentleness and beauty, framed in the loveliness of a stained glass window. For New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan, Jesus is a political revolutionary who led a peasant uprising against the Romans in the name of God’s justice and reign. For author Marcus Borg, Jesus is a wisdom teacher who embodies and shares timeless insights into what is really real and how we ought to live. Jesus can (and should) mean different things for different people, according to their different needs.

And experiencing a relationship with Jesus can (and should) mean different things for different people, according to their different needs, as well. Evangelicals talk about relationship with Jesus as accepting Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. Mystics talk about relationship with Jesus as being united with Jesus, so that their spirits and Christ’s Spirit become as one. Sacramentalists talk about relationship with Jesus as encountering the Real Presence of Christ in liturgical ritual and effective signs of bread and wine and water and oil. Servant ministers talk about relationship with Jesus as seeing Jesus in the poor, the outcast, the marginalized, and working with Jesus for justice in the world. I knew a woman once who said her main way of being in relationship with Jesus was to talk to him, just talk to him, every morning over breakfast to have an

imaginary conversation with Jesus, telling him about her day, her plans, her hopes, her fears, her needs, her friends that she was praying for—just saying things to Jesus and listening, imaginatively, for what Jesus would say to her. Experiencing a relationship with Jesus can mean different things for different people.

And if our reason for being a church is to prepare the way of the Lord, if our reason for being a church is to be like John the baptizer and point to Jesus, if our reason for being a church is to create the conditions where people can come to know and feel and experience a relationship with Jesus which can transform their lives—then we as a church must be prepared to share all these meanings of Jesus and all these relationships with Jesus in every way we can. Our growing, our thriving, our flourishing as a congregation in Christ will have everything to do with how we prepare the space where people can come to know Jesus—not just know *about* Jesus, but know *Jesus*—and to know Jesus in the ways and means and relationships that mean the most to them. And how well we can do *that* will depend on how well *we* come to know Jesus—not just know about Jesus, but know Jesus—in the ways and means and relationships that really mean the most to *us*.

So how about it? Who is Jesus *for you*? What does experiencing a relationship with Jesus mean *for you*? If you had the opportunity to stand up here, in the pulpit, and tell your parish community what Jesus means to you, what would you say? If you had the opportunity to invite a friend to Trinity to experience a relationship with Jesus here, what would you tell them it is like? People who study church growth and membership trends say that the most effective way to bring new members into a church is still to have existing members invite them. Churches can do marketing campaigns—and that’s not a bad thing for them to do. Churches can offer contemporary liturgies or young adult liturgies or hip-hop liturgies or liturgies geared to niche demographics—and that’s not a bad thing for them to do. Churches can offer artistic or musical programs that will bring people through their doors and hopefully interest them in coming back for worship on Sunday—and that’s not a bad thing for them to do. But still the single most effective way to bring new members into participation in a church is when existing members invite them, when people who have a meaningful experience of relationship with Jesus in a place and in a community invite others to come share that experience with them. One of the goals you all put in your profile for calling a new rector to Trinity is a desire to grow Trinity’s membership. That is something we can all work on together, as each of us points the way to Jesus by inviting people to come share the relationship with Jesus we have at Trinity. So think about it: How would you prepare the way for someone to come here and encounter the Jesus you know?

The Gospel says that the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to John, because they heard how he was preparing the way of the Lord. Wouldn’t it be something if all the people of Staunton, if the whole Shenandoah countryside, knew about Trinity, because they heard how we prepare the way of the Lord, how we point the way to Jesus, in the mission and ministry and worship and service we experience here?

Because in the end, when everything else is said and done, that is the one thing we have to do, pointing the way to Jesus is the one reason we exist as a church. When volunteers serve Noon Lunch, that is preparing the way for people to know Jesus in a hot meal and a compassionate welcome. When choristers practice long hours to sing beautiful Lessons and Carols or favorite songs at Christmas Eve services, that is preparing the way for people to know Jesus in the joy and celebration of worship. When a devoted handful of people gather around healing prayers or Taize music, that is preparing the way for people to know Jesus in meditative prayer and quiet companionship. When we talk about stewardship, when we plan for the right use of treasure and time and talent, that is preparing the way for people to know Jesus in the ministry of resources. In everything we do—in worship, in service, in hospitality, in justice; in building up membership, in paying the bills, in maintaining our beautiful buildings, in carrying on the institutions of our parish life; in gathering together, and in going forth—in everything we do, the one thing that matters is to point the way to Jesus, the one thing that matters is to prepare the way of the Lord. Like John the baptizer in today’s Gospel, we are called to make that one thing the reason for everything. May that Advent truth be true for us. Amen.