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Luke 3:1-6

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Have you ever tried to paint a small room or a stairwell in a house?

- The process of applying the paint to the wall in a small room or a stairwell,
 - actually isn't a big deal, -
 - because if you are dealing with a fairly small space
 - the painting itself
 - doesn't take very long, - -
- But as anyone who has done any painting knows,
 - there is a tremendous amount of work to be done
 - before you ever get to the actual painting.- -
 - To do the job well,
 - You would need to cover the flooring.
 - You need to tape up the trim to mask the fact -
 - that most non-professional painters -
 - aren't always the neatest.
 - You need to find a time to do the work-
 - when you'll have time to let the paint dry
 - and then add a second coat to make sure the color looks good .- -
 - You will need to carefully pull all that tape off the wall -
 - and dispose of it
 - without getting too much paint on yourself -

- or anything else.

- The painting itself -

- doesn't take that long,

- but the preparation -

- to get to the point where you can actually paint, -

- well that - -

- that often requires more work -

- than applying the paint to the wall.- -

- Investing time in preparation -

- is important in painting -

- and as our reading from the Gospel of Luke today makes it clear, - -

- it is important for us as followers of Jesus.

- For as John the Baptist's ministry

- and message demonstrates, -

- there is important prep work

- that needs to be done -

- in our hearts and in the world -

- before the coming of Jesus. - -

- Prepare the way of the Lord.

- That's John's message

- to this crowd of people

who have gathered around him in the wilderness -

- and that's John's message -

- to all of us who are gathered together -

- in the body of Christ. - -

- Prepare the way -

- for Jesus to come.

- Make the path straight. -

- Unlock the doors that are closed. -

- Smooth out the rough edges, -

- as a part of

- Jesus' mission to love and save the world.

- Now to be sure -

- this close to Christmas,

- It's easy to hear -

- 'Prepare the way' - -

- and think

- 'OK,

- Christmas is coming

- so I need to decorate,

- to buy presents,

- to put up a Christmas tree, -

- and get ready for Christmas morning,' - -

- but John's call to prepare

- goes far beyond

- preparing for Christmas celebrations on December 25, 2018. - -

- John's call to prepare the way
 - is a much broader appeal
 - that encourages us to prepare
 - both for Christ's coming at Christmas
 - and for Christ's promised return someday. - -
- And while
 - the crowd's gathered around John 2000 years ago
 - were clearly being instructed to repent and prepare
 - for the ministry of Jesus
 - which was about to begin in their community, - -
- for you and for me,
 - the call to prepare the way -
 - is an invitation -
 - to prepare ourselves for Jesus' coming
 - and to help prepare others to know God's love in their lives.

Now even though

- the words from Isaiah quoted in our reading from Luke
 - speak of preparing the way of the Lord
 - by making paths straight,
 - by filling valleys,
 - and making mountains low,
- the work John is describing doesn't require bulldozers and backhoes.
 - No,

- the preparation we are called to do
 - requires us to look first at ourselves -
 - and how our lives are shaped -
 - or could be shaped -
 - by Jesus' presence with us. -

- The preparation we are called to do
 - also invites us
 - to look at how we can help prepare others
 - for the coming of Jesus into their lives.

Prepare the way. -

- It's a broad statement -
 - and neither John nor Jesus -
 - provide us with a check list to help us figure out
 - what we need to do as a part of that preparation.
- In fact,
 - no matter how hard you look,
 - you'll never find a document created by John or Jesus
 - with a title like . . .
 - '12 Steps to Prepare for Christ's Coming', -

but in our affirmation our baptism service,

- we do lift up five areas of response to God's gift of love - -
 - that seem like a pretty helpful starting point -
 - as we think about how we can prepare ourselves -

- and prepare the world around us to experience

- the love of God in Jesus.

- If you don't remember those five promises and our response,

- we ask -

- 'Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in Holy Baptism:

- to live among God's faithful people,

- to hear God's Word and share in the Lord's supper,

to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,

- to serve all people, following the example of our Jesus,

- and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?'

- and we respond

- 'I do and I ask God to help and guide me.'

- (*ELW, Affirmation of Baptism*)

- As I said,

- we don't have a check list,

- but it seems to me that these affirmation of baptism promises

- are a pretty good place to start -

- if we want to making the path straight in our hearts

- and in our community for the coming of Jesus. -

- Think about it this way.

- As we live among God's faithful people,

- as we intentionally gather with other Christians

- for fellowship, support and learning,

- we prepare for Christ's coming
 - by connecting to the body of Christ more fully. -
- As we hear God's Word and share in the Lord's supper,
 - as we gather for worship to give praise to God
 - and to hear God's Word proclaimed,
 - as we are fed and nourished by Christ's body and blood,
 - we prepare for Christ's coming
 - by experiencing
 - God's promise of forgiveness
 - and new life through Jesus.
- As we proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,
 - as we share our stories of faith with our neighbors and friends,
 - as we allow our actions and our choices to be shaped by our faith,
 - we prepare for Christ's coming
 - by opening the door for someone else -
 - to discover the hope and help that comes
 - through a relationship with God.
- As we serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus,
 - as we help people in need,
 - as we take care of those who are sick or ill,
 - as we undertake mission projects,
 - as we show kindness and compassion
 - to our family and friends,

- we prepare for Christ's coming

- by helping others to experience the good news

- of God's saving love. - -

- And as we strive for justice and peace in all the earth,

- as we seek to find peaceful solutions to conflicts,

- as we seek to speak for those who have no voice in society,

- as we pray for healing and wholeness

- for the brokenness of the world,

- we prepare for Christ's coming

- by offering a glimpse of God's kingdom -

- where all are equal in God's sight.

- Now to be fair, -

- you won't be able to fulfill all five of these promises perfectly everyday. -

- So, don't worry about trying to be perfect,

- just try to be as faithful as you can

- and try focusing on one promise at a time. -

- Remember that each of us,

- regardless of our faults or imperfections, -

- has a part to play in this ministry John sets in motion - -

- to prepare the way of the Lord.

- Which means that each of us will prepare the way a little differently.

- For you,

- preparing the way for Jesus

- might mean

- telling your story of faith to your children or grandchildren

- so that they will know what God's love means to you.

- Preparing the way for Jesus might mean

- putting your faith into action

- and treating people fairly and honestly at work.

- Preparing the way for Jesus might mean

- participating in a helping ministry

- during the holiday season,

- not to get credit for yourself, -

- but as a way of responding to God's generous love

- for you.

- Preparing the way for Jesus might mean

- writing a card to someone who is grieving -

- or bringing someone without a church home

- to worship on Christmas Eve.

- To be sure,

- the preparation John is calling us to do

- will take a little effort,

- but just as the work that goes into preparing to paint

- a small room or a staircase-

- helps yield beautiful results,

- so too will the preparation John is inviting us to do

- help yield beautiful results in our hearts and in the world.

- For when we prepare for Christ's coming

- by growing in our relationship with God

- and by sharing the joy of God's love with others,

- then we and all those around us -

- have the opportunity to experience more fully

- the hope and help that comes from -

- Jesus' presence in our lives.