

Friday Night, April 21, 2023
Freedom Church

Questions:

How can you “get in the room” tonight?

What do you need to leave behind to be here?

Want to talk about making room for God to move tonight. To bring ourselves here and allow God to pull us aside and create space for him to move.

Prepare the Way of the Lord

When I was little, all I wanted was to be a singer. In those days, we had albums and cassettes and I would spend hours in my room singing along with my Disney records or with Julie Andrews in the Sound of Music. I am sure the neighbours loved it.

One thing led to another and I found myself at a small conservatory college in Seattle as a classical voice, music major. Each semester, we would perform an opera, so I found myself taking on the form of Buttercup in HMS Pinafore by Gilbert and Sullivan, or an old woman in an opera written by one of my professors...but my starring role was as a cookie in Hansel and Gretel.

I loved the theatre. The prep, the rehearsals, the costumes and staging...all of it. One of the best parts was opening night. I loved walking up to the closed curtain and listening to the audience, trying to figure out if they were a hot crowd or a dud. You could feel the buzz right through the curtain. The anticipation was electric as soon enough the curtain would raise and off we would go.

As we set sail into this weekend, I want to focus on preparation and anticipation as we make room for God to move.

Turn with me to matt. 3:1-12

Matt 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist came to the Judean wilderness and began preaching. His message was, “Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.” The prophet Isaiah was speaking about John when he said,

“He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord’s coming!
Clear the road for him!’”

John's clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey. People from Jerusalem and from all of Judea and all over the Jordan Valley went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to watch him baptize, he denounced them. "You brood of snakes!" he exclaimed. "Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don't just say to each other, 'We're safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.' That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize with water those who repent of their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not worthy even to be his slave and carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire."

Pray.

The memory of waiting for the show to start comes to mind when I read this passage. John the Baptist bursts on to the scene, with the message, Get ready! The Lord is coming!"

In the first few chapters in the Gospel of Matthew, we have been introduced to some of the characters that pave the way for the arrival of Jesus.

This is a good time to remember that the whole Bible is one, continuous story leading to Jesus.

With this in mind, let's see how these events set the scene for the arrival of Jesus.

Matthew 3:3, references Isaiah 40 saying:

The prophet Isaiah was speaking about John when he said,
"He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord's coming!
Clear the road for him!'"

Let's reach back to Isaiah for a few minutes so we understand why this is important.

Go with me to Isaiah 6:

Isaiah describes a fantastical scene of the throne room of God:

We see the throne room of God, in verse 3 the angels are calling to each other,

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Heaven’s Armies!
The whole earth is filled with his glory!”

Isaiah is mortified by his own humanity and cries out, “I am doomed! I am a sinful man!” but one of the seraphim came and touched his lips with coal and rather than burning him, it purifies him.

The Lord then asks, who He should send as a messenger to the nation and Isaiah beautifully responds: “Here I am, send me”

- Let’s pause here and look again at John the Baptist. In John 1:19-23

Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”

²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.”²¹ And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah? He said, “I am not.”

“Are you the Prophet?”

And he answered, “No.”²² Then they said to him, “Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?”²³ He said: “I *am* ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Make straight the way of the Lord,” as the prophet Isaiah said.”

So, John is a messenger and Isaiah is a messenger, both assigned to prepare the way of the Lord.

The message God gave Isaiah in chapter 6:9-13 was similar to the message we read in Matthew 3, the people’s hearts are hard and their ears are plugged, they do not understand or turn to God for healing.

In Isaiah’s day, Israel had reached a point of no return. He had come with a message of judgement and hope.

In 6:13, God describes the devastation:

If even a tenth—a remnant—survive,
it will be invaded again and burned.
But as a terebinth or oak tree leaves a stump when it is cut down,
so Israel’s stump will be a holy seed.”

Imagine this with me, God is saying that Israel is like a mighty tree that will be cut down and left in a field. Then the stump itself will be burned.

If we return to Genesis 12 we see where this mighty tree started. God makes a promise to Abraham that through Abraham, a mighty nation would be born.

By the time we reach the verse in Isaiah, it seems that all hope for that mighty tree, and the promise to Abraham is close to being snuffed out.

We see the smouldering stump of Israel and out of it is growing a holy seed.

And you guessed it, that seed is Jesus.

Let's see what Isaiah prophecies about this holy seed:

7:11 - the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us').

11:1-4 - Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot—
yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root.
And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

Can you hear his excitement? The anticipation? God says, in Isaiah 43:18-19 it is nothing compared to what I am going to do! I am getting ready to do something completely new, you can't even imagine how good it will be!

When we look at the burned stump, we might see destruction and hopelessness, but God saw a holy seed imbedded.

Now let's go back to Matt 3:7-10 and look for the repeated themes in the passage:

Vs. 7 - But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

In short, John the Baptist is saying, "there is a new sheriff in town, you best be ready" - whistle

This is *incredible* news for those who were ready to soften their hearts and repent. This is *terrible* news for the religious leaders who were more interested in tradition and institutional power.

Can you feel the anticipation? Things are changing, the atmosphere is shifting, God is on the move.

I started by saying that here in the beginning chapters of the gospel according to Matthew, we are meeting some important characters in the Biblical narrative.

We will hear more about John the Baptist and the Pharisees, in the days to come. But today, let's just try to imagine what it was like to be there and feel the rumble of God's plan unfolding.

What does all of this mean for us here and now?

Does anyone else feel like God is preparing us for something new? There is a rumbling, an anticipation, God is on the move.

I have a few short thoughts/questions to finish up today:

- 1) John's message was to prepare the way of the Lord. What does it look like to prepare the way of the Lord in our lives?
 - a. Godspell – after I gathered my internal organs and belongings, I watched the cast skip around and sing, “prepare ye the way of the Lord”
 - b. The next chapters we will study will lead us through the heady days of Jesus calling his disciples, performing miracles, being a BOSS with the religious leaders of the day and showing us all a new way to be human.
 - c. That all sounds amazing, but we will also see Jesus agonizing in the garden, being beaten within an inch of his life, then hung on a cross as an innocent man.
 - d. We will see his disciples scatter and those who promised to follow will betray him.
 - e. I think of this preparation like our marriage vows – picture – we have been married 19 years on April 10. Yay us! **What in the world did we know on that day when we said, “in sickness and health, richer or poorer?”** I kind of want to yell at those sweet faces, “buckle up kids! This is going to be a bumpy ride”
 - i. Preparation is commitment. Our friends in their marriage vows said, **“I love what I know, I trust what I don't know” – it is posturing our hearts to say, I don't know what is coming, but I know that I will face it with you Jesus.**
 1. I have been serving God now for 34 years. When I gave my life to Him, I had no idea the suffering, the heartache that would come.
 - a. Broken relationships, grief, disillusionment, financial trouble, delayed promises, betrayal, rejection, my own dumb decisions...so many things...
 2. I also had no idea how sweet and beautiful His presence and companionship would be.
 3. **I was not necessarily prepared for the circumstances that would come, but I was prepared to follow Him, no matter what.**
 - ii. Preparation is repentance – This sounds so ominous and guilt inducing. But let's make it simple.
 1. Sin keeps us from God, leads us on a path of destruction and death.

2. **Romans 6:23** The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.
3. **James 1:14-15** Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.
4. Yuck.
5. Sin is a slippery slope, so enticing, so full of promise to make our lives better –
6. **Galatians 5:19-21** When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.
7. So repentance begins with the bad news that we are sinners, lost in wanting our own way. But is quickly followed by the good news that we have a saviour who paved the way for us out of sin if we will do as John the Baptist invites us to repent of our sins and turn back to God.
8. Repenting is the acknowledgement that I have wandered from the heart of God and the invitation to return to him.

2) There is always hope

- a. Let's look at Israel back in Isaiah – pictured as a tree, cut down to a stump and then burned.
- b. Have you ever felt like this?
 - i. I have felt like this because of my own foolish choices. I would make a mistake and be buried under shame and condemnation.
 - ii. I have also felt like this because of rejection. Times when I was pushed aside, overlooked, pushed to the edges of the group or out of the group entirely.
 - iii. Dead ends feel horrible. But God gives us this imagery so we will not lose heart and give up.
 - iv. It is never too late, you are never too far gone, you can never run so far that in a moment you could not turn to God and He would catch you and bring you home.

3) God is on the move

- a. We are Narnia fans in our family. Aslan, a great lion, is a picture of God in the series. At different times throughout the books, mostly in times of great despair, the characters would hear that Aslan is on the move.
- b. This is the imagery that comes to mind when I think of John the Baptist here in Matt. 3, all we see is a wild guy coming out of the wilderness calling people to return to God, but we also feel the undercurrent of anticipation. The rumble of heaven.
 - i. God has not forgotten His promise to his people
 - ii. God is rolling up His sleeves and getting ready to address injustice

- iii. God is on the move for them, he is on the move for you, he is on the move for your family.
- iv. Get ready.

Let's try to picture this moment in history, it's like me, waiting behind the curtain, listening to the audience. All of the preparation and momentum has brought us here, to this moment and the real show is about to begin.

Are we ready?

All we need to be ready is to humble ourselves and turn to God. If you are a believer here, maybe you just need a moment to remind yourself and God that you are ready to follow him all over again. Let his nearness be sweet to you.

Maybe you need to come close to him again, confess your sin whether its giving in to temptation or just letting your heart grow cold. Maybe you are going through the motions but your heart is far away.

If you do not know God, or you have walked away from God, this is your chance to return. He is patient to you, loving and kind and you don't have to get your act together before you come. He will work with you wherever you are, just come to Him.

Call to the altar.