

# David W. Lloyd: Preparing the Way of the Lord

Seekers Church

December 7, 1997

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## Preparing the Way of the Lord

The story of John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness is traditionally included in the Gospel readings for Advent. It is not as strange as it may seem. As you can see by the [clown skit](#), the births of Jesus and John the Baptist were linked by the kinship between Elizabeth and Mary. John's preaching in the wilderness is included in the Gospel passages for Advent to remind us that the coming of salvation requires preparation. It is not enough to look for signs of salvation, as one looks for the coming of summer in the buds of trees, if you remember Luke's Gospel last week. The seeds of new life and new spirit that Marjory so eloquently discussed with us last week are critical to the work of God in redemption. But preparation of the people of God is critical as well. The seed must have fertile soil.

How do we 20 centuries later prepare the way of the Lord during Advent? John's preaching repeats the prophecy of Isaiah – we prepare for the Lord's coming by making the way straight. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain leveled, corners straightened, and rough places smoothed. We can still follow this today.

We prepare first by making the way of the Lord straight. In the time of the Bible, there was a road through the desert east of the Jordan River from Damascus south to below the Dead Sea, where it connected with caravan routes to Egypt. You can

still see traces of it from the air. It was called the "King's Highway" and it was used by traders, diplomats, and armies. The King's Highway was broad, inclusive, and welcoming. And it is believed that the Jewish exiles on their way back from captivity in Babylon traveled part of it. We might ask ourselves, do we make a way that is straight for others to find God? Do we make a way that is broad, inclusive, and welcoming – a way home to God?

I confess that I have on occasion made the way to God difficult for others without even knowing I was doing so. During the men's retreat we had a time of prayers of affirmation and love and support for each other. It was wonderful – a way to feel community and it was a way to see ourselves as others see us, and it was a way to hear God's word to us through our brothers. Among the prayers I was able to hear God telling me that I have been distant or intimidating to some. And so I have work to do this Advent to prepare the way of the Lord.

I was struck by Carolyn Shields' report of "Shared Garden II" and her awareness of how that weekend served as a broad way and expanded her spirituality to find God in new ways. In her report Carolyn relates how Sharon Ringe of Wesley Seminary stated that the places where we meet God become sacred to us. Unfortunately, instead of looking at truth through these places we often believe that the places are the truth, and thus become idols. For example, the Bible is a place through which millions of people have found God. Unfortunately, many people have confused the truth of the God the Bible reveals with itself as being the truth. Such people make the Bible a barricaded road where it is difficult for others to travel to find God; they have made the Bible an idol. Whenever we clear away our idols and let God's truth shine through them, we are making the way to God broad for others.

Isaiah and John remind us that preparation for the Lord includes raising up valleys. In the School of Christian Living

class on social justice issues we read Jonathan Kozol's book, Amazing Grace, about the lives of children in the poorest ward in the poorest electoral district in the nation – in the South Bronx of New York. And we have been challenged to find out what we can do to respond to similar children in our nation's capital. Last week at our last class I asked everyone to take on some personal disciplines for a month – to pray for these issues, to journal about what they personally could do, and to journal about what Seekers could do and what the Church universal could do. As we do this, we are raising up valleys of darkness into light.

As a congregation we have valleys to raise up – our Seekers budget for this year allows us to identify those areas here in the Washington metropolitan area, in the nation, and around the world where money can make a difference. I encourage you to study, really study, and reflect on the places where we have given money. Each one of them has stories like those Roy shared with us two Sunday's ago, stories of God at work in people's lives. As we take on the discipline of generosity, not just tithing, during Advent, we are preparing the way of the Lord by raising up valleys of poverty into richness.

And there are other valleys to raise up, personal valleys of relationships. Last Sunday people spoke of estrangement from their families of origin. How can we be family to each other? How can we help those estranged see God at work in their families? Others have spoken at other times of estrangement from previous congregations where they worshipped and from entire denominations. When we help each other see the Spirit moving in different ways in different parts of the body of Christ, we are lifting them up from valleys. As we help each other see that the eye is not the hand and the mouth is not the foot, and trust God to see the value that we cannot, we are preparing the way of the Lord in our support for each other.

Isaiah and John remind us that as we prepare the Lord's way we

have mountains to bring low. The first mountain is the hoarding of resources we claim as Americans. This mountain is built on a cultural foundation of ambition and self-interest that blend with greed and selfishness. When you read the first three chapters of Luke as a unity, it is very clear that there is a radical ethic common to John and to Jesus that challenges the existing order. Mary, pondering over what the angel has told her, sees it clearly:

*...the arrogant of heart and mind he has put to rout,  
he has brought down monarchs from their thrones,  
but the humble have been lifted high.  
The hungry he has satisfied with good things,  
the rich sent empty away.*

John tells the tax-gatherers that they must exact no more tax than the assessment, and he tells the soldiers that they are not to bully or blackmail the citizenry. Later, Jesus tells the disciples – that’s us – to choose the least place, to sell all we have and give it to the poor, to trust that God loves us like the sparrows and the lilies of the field.

But this means that we have to come down from the mountain that is my hoard of treasure. I confess that I am bound in “golden handcuffs” of salary, and position, and standard of living, and American culture and race and maleness. When Seekers first engaged in dialogue about racism and feminism, I knew that as a white, male, American, lawyer, I had unfair advantages. I envisioned a fulcrum of social policy and Christianity at the end where I stood, that could pivot up those who were disadvantaged – women, people of color, non-Americans. But then I became aware that the radical challenge of the Gospel is to think of the fulcrum in the middle – to bring me down from that privileged place as it lifts others up. And a few weeks ago in our social justice class, Peter Bankson pointed out that the fulcrum might be over at the other end, so that the mountain on which I stand is leveled.

And I have to ask myself, do I want to prepare the way for the kind of Messiah who calls me to be a servant like him, one who chose not to cling to equality with God, but to humble himself even unto death?

Do you have mountains and hills in your life that need to be leveled? Are there mountains and hills in Seekers that must disappear for us to prepare for the coming of the Lord? Do we have the courage to start leveling these during Advent?

And Isaiah and John remind us that we have crooked things to straighten and rough places to smooth before the Lord's way is prepared. We are like minerals that need to be thrown into the hopper of a gemstone polisher, like ore that needs to suffer the refiner's fire. I am fortunate that I have so many people in my life who take me to task, although it's taken me years, far too many years, to appreciate that they are preparing me for the Lord. Sharon and Meredith and Erica, lead the list. In fact, when I ask Erica why she is so diligent about bursting my bubble of pride and self-satisfaction, she simply states, "It's my job." I have others in Seekers – Manning, Sonya, Doug, Ron, Diane, and my mission group Marjory, Ron, Margreta, Ken, Ann, and Jeanne – who care enough about me to straighten me out and knock off some of my rough edges.

Maybe you have crooked things to straighten and rough places to smooth. One of the strengths of this community is that if when we will ourselves to be vulnerable and ask for help in becoming straightened out and polished up, someone will respond. At first the process may be painful. It may feel very much like the refiner's fire. But as the months and years pass, we come to know that it each time we choose to become vulnerable in relationship it brings us closer to the kingdom of God.

In Seekers we still have crooked things to straighten and rough places to smooth, starting with our unfinished business of the decision about a new place to worship. We have chosen

to work with this issue again, to pass through the refiner's fire. And maybe we can work on our relationships with the other congregations of the Church of the Saviour, which have been crooked and rough on occasion. Maybe we can choose as a congregation as a community discipline to jump into the gem polisher to work on this.

Preparing the way of the Lord sounds like hard work, and it is. It sounds like dangerous work, and it is. Have you ever seen a section of interstate highway being built in the mountains? It has to maintain an easy grade for the truck traffic and so millions of cubic yards of earth are moved to level mountains and fill in valleys. Dynamite is touched off, and rocks slide. Workers sweat and sometimes some are injured. But there is a plan, and coordination, and support for the road builders. And there is a plan, and coordination, and support for us as we prepare the way of the Lord, this year in Advent and every year in Advent.

For we have been exiles and he welcomed us back through the cross. Now we prepare to eat the bread of his life and drink the blood of his life, as sustenance for the work of preparing the way for other exiles and for his coming. And as a victory toast for a job well done. For Christ has made the way broad, and inclusive and welcoming. It's straight, and has an easy grade, there are no tough corners or rough places. By his sacrifice we are healed, we are welcomed into the fullness of life. Let us eat and drink in joy.