

# “Preparing for Our God”

Luke 3:1-6, Malachi 3:1-4, Philippians 1:3-11

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From the Pulpit

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Luke 3:1-6, Malachi 3:1-4, Philippians 1:3-11

Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Prepare ye the way of the Lord.

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*Let us pray: We have gathered not out of our need to stay the same, but to change. Open our hearts, our minds, our souls to you. Amen.*

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It was late summer when George spotted a pot hole in the road. The road with the pot hole was a state route in front of George’s house. Every time a car or truck went over the pot hole George would hear a thump-thump. George called the state highway department to fix the hole. They said they’d get to it, but they didn’t. The pot hole only grew slightly larger that early autumn.

George figured they had forgotten, so he called again. The voice at the highway department said they’d get to it, but they didn’t. When the cold set in, the pot hole grew bigger and bigger. When trucks went over the pot hole George’s house began to shake. The noise would wake him in the middle of the night. George began collecting hub caps that popped off the cars. George began calling the highway department daily only now he was told it was too cold to fix the pot hole. Finally, on a cold December day the highway department came but not the way George wanted. They put up a sign which read, “Rough Road Ahead.”

It is Advent and there is a voice crying in the wilderness. The voice cries out to make paths straight, to fill in the valleys, to make every hill low, to make the rough ways smooth. It is not about literal pot holes. This is a call for us to change our behavior for the coming of our God.

Luke's gospel gives us a who different twist to the idea of preparing for our God. Luke doesn't just want us to proclaim the coming of God. Luke wants us to clean-up our life so that we might enjoy the salvation of God. Luke begins the story by telling us about the leaders of the empire, the political leaders and religious leaders of his day. This is in keeping with Luke's idea that this message of God's salvation is to be given to *all* people. The one to deliver this message is none other than John the Baptist. To prove what he was saying from scripture, Luke quotes Isaiah, chapter forty. It's a black and white morality saying there will be no more hills or valleys, no more crooked and rough roads, all will be straight, filled, level and smooth. Only Luke is telling us this a little differently from the other gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John. Luke quotes Isaiah with universal allusions saying, "*Every* valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low." Luke goes on to say, "*All* flesh shall see the salvation of God."

When the ancient prophet Isaiah was saying these words, the people of Israel were beginning to return home from the Babylonian Exile. They were on a highway going home. God is the one coming out into the wilderness – out into the nothingness – where God will take up habitation with the people. God comes to the people who had forgotten their God or had lived as if there was no God. Now they were filling in the valleys of their lives, leveling the mountains, making the steep rises and deep falls level, making the rough smooth in moral preparation for God's coming to them. Other nations would look at these people and the way of God participated with them and it would become obvious for all to see, God delivered these people. That was what Isaiah was saying, God delivered these people.

Luke sees things quite differently. Luke is trying to give an historical account with the setting of the empire, the rulers and the religious leaders. Luke claims that John the Baptist is the divine messenger coming out of the wilderness with a divine message. This divine message is preached through John the Baptist. Luke sees the role of John the Baptist as defining and proclaiming the coming of God in Jesus of Nazareth. This divine message

and coming required preparation with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. When it comes to baptism, John the Baptist say, “I’m you guy!” He appears as just an ordinary guy, but he is the one God would use. His message is to prepare for the coming and, “*all flesh will see the salvation of God.*”

We are living in a world where God is mocked by those who would argue, “If God is all powerful, then God is not good because of the evil in the world.” Or the opposite is argued, “If God is good, then God is not all powerful because of the evil in this world.” Luke’s message calls us to leave Philosophy 101 and return to God.

This scripture returns us to a proper perspective like the table grace many of us learned as children, “God is great, God is good.” God’s presence come to us, indeed to *all* flesh and offers us God’s salvation. Our call is to repent of our evil ways, those highways and byways in life needing repair and to receive God’s salvation.

It’s a hard thing to swallow this kind of message, that we need to change, to repent. It reminds me of the pastor in a small rural church – one of my colleagues. She was asked by a grumpy old man in her church, “What’s wrong with our church? Attendance is down, the choir is falling apart and it’s been four weeks since we had any children for the children’s moment.” In frustration my pastor friend asked her grumpy old church leader, “Tell me, do you think it is ignorance or apathy?” The church leader thought for a moment and walking away said, “I don’t know and I don’t care.”

Luke is trying to rattle our cages to make us know God is coming and to get us to care about that coming. Luke is trying to wake us up to do what is right in this world and in our lives, just like John the Baptist.

First Congregational Church United Church of Christ has a distinguished heritage as an abolitionist congregation. It’s in our congregation’s DNA. We are a church that has been out front, seeking justice in Civil Rights, in

recognition of the LGBTQ+ community, in marriage equality, and in a fair wage compensation, just to name a few of the wrongs we sought to make morally right in our society. In this Season of Advent, we are called to not stop now, but to make sure our lives are ready to see and to act where justice is needed for God's creation.

Spoiler alert. At Christmas time we will hear the word *Emmanuel*, which means God with us.

God is coming to us, God will be for us, and God will be with us.

Our job is to examine our lives to see if we are ready for the coming of God. Perfection is not required but change is. Are we willing to change what needs to change in our lives in preparation for the coming of God? Are we willing to make the highway of our lives smoother, so we can see and hear where God is still speaking to us? Will we allow the Holy Spirit to rattle our cages to wake us up to what God has called us to be and to do? That is what the voice in the wilderness is calling us to do, to prepare for the coming of God.

Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Prepare ye the way of the Lord.

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Amen.

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