

“The Prophet’s Song No One Wants to Hear”

*Sermon by Rev. Dr. John M. Best to the First Presbyterian Church of Battle Creek
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It’s the Season of Advent.

In my house, it’s the time we pull out the Christmas music and to begin to decorate.
I’ve noticed that this year, my neighbors are early in their decorating.
It seems like we need something special this year.
In worship, we pull out a few extra stops.
We’re adding the lighting of the Advent candles with a candle lighting song.
We’ve set up a Nativity Scene.

In our gospel text today (Luke 3:1-6), we have the Prophet’s Song!

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight...”

If you are like me and came of age with Godspell,
You can imagine the blowing of a rams horn and the musical
opening with John singing, *“Prepare the way of the Lord...”*

Before Godspell, there was Handel’s Messiah,
and before Handel, there was John the Baptist
and before John, there was Isaiah,
who sang this song, the song of the prophet,
“A voice cries out, ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,’”
(Isaiah 40:3)

which John took to heart and claimed as his ministry.
It’s a song about preparing the way for the Messiah, the Anointed One,
the One everyone was waiting for, who would deliver them.
The prophet Malachi, also sang this song, but with different words.
*“See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me,
And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” (Malachi 3:1)*

The Prophet’s song became the song of the people,

FOR THOSE WANDERING IN THE WILDERNESS of a hard life,
as they waited for the expected one, a savior to deliver them.

The poor farmer overburdened with taxes to Rome.
The blind beggar sitting by the road as world rushed by.
The poor widow who put her last penny in the temple treasury.
The tax collector who has lost all credibility and his last friend for a buck.
The king, who stole his brother’s wife, along with any number of ruthless acts
to consolidate his power. Underneath the façade of power and wealth
lies somewhere deep within a conscience of guilt.
The Roman Procurator, who wanted to be anywhere but in Palestine.

All longing to be delivered from their misery.

As do people today.

- Cancer patients waiting for a cure;

- AIDs and HIV Patients: This Tuesday is World AIDS Day;
- All of us waiting for a Covid Vaccine and some semblance of normalcy;
- Transplant recipients waiting for an organ donor;
- Victims of violence waiting for common sense gun legislation;
- Women waiting for equal rights, equal pay, for men to grow up;
- People of color waiting for white folks to recognize and share their privilege.
- Illegal Immigrants waiting for immigration common sense legislation
- Employees waiting for executives and management to share the profits;
- Minimum Wage Workers waiting for a living wage.

In 1812, Frans Mikael Franzen put John's words to an old Lutheran Hymn tune,

"Prepare the way O Zion, Your Christ is coming near.

Let every hill and valley a level way appear." (Glory To God #106)

Actually! That sounds kind of drastic! Radical even!

"Every valley shall be filled. Every mountain and hill made low." (Luke 3:5).

Sounds like Interstate 80 across the Mountain Wilds of Pennsylvania.

Penn DoT pulled that one off with a lot of dynamite,

and made my trips to College a lot easier.

"and the crooked shall be made straight" (v. 5).

Sounds like the winding roads of West Virginia.

My brother Charlie went to Davis & Elkins College in Elkins WV.

I road along in the back of a station wagon, and always got car sick.

Those winding mountain roads could use some straightening.

We love the song and the thought of being delivered from what binds us.

YET, FEW WANT TO HEAR WHAT THAT MEANS!

It means that the landscape must shift.

Lives have to change...the lives of those like those who came out from Jerusalem to hear John in the wilderness, call them to repent, change their ways.

Lives have to change... white lives need to change,

our lives who have been privileged by policies that serve and protect us, at the cost of others, need to change.

John preached "Repent," Turn around. Change your behaviors.

Jesus would then begin his ministry preaching

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mar 1:15)

Good News—Deliverance is not magical!

It's transformative. It disrupts the status quo, what's comfortable to many.

I remember visiting an older member of my first church in Burnt Cabins, PA.

The Church building sat right next to the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

She told me about when the Turnpike was built in the 1930's.

Her family owned property the Turnpike Commission wanted.

When the man came to talk to her,

she met him with a shotgun in her hands.
"Over my dead body," she said.
I'm one of millions who have traveled and benefited from that Turnpike.
I actually got stuck on it for 18 hours in a snow storm one trip back to college.
But that's another story.

Do you remember **the TV Show "The Waltons." I'm dating myself now.**

Remember **the episode** when the National Park Service was beginning to build
the Sky Line Drive along the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia.

When the park service representative approached the Walton's neighbors,
They met him with a gun in their hands.

"Over our dead bodies."

But the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Skyline Drive did get built,
and I am one of millions who have loved driving those scenic highways.

Then there is the Church!

For 36 years I've listened to complaints about dwindling worship attendance.
I've worked my whole career for church transformation,
but the first thing you learn about change is resistance.

The same people who complain often seem to be the most resistant,
to any change.

Yet the Prophet's Song calls for transforming the landscape.

"Every valley shall be filled. Every mountain and hill made low."

It's a song it seems no one wants to hear

IF IT REQUIRES ANYTHING FROM THEM.

Yet here we are with our hearts opened, softened a bit if you will,
ready to be redirected, ready to be delivered.

ready to sing, but this year we can't even gather to sing together.

A bell hangs on the outside the church tower of the Montauk Church, where I served for 12 years.

It hangs there and not up in the tower...I'm not sure why.

Just prior to worship someone pulls the short rope hanging from the clapper
calling people to worship.

The inscription on the bells reads,

***"Ring out the darkness in the land,
Ring in the Christ who is to be."***

This year, 2020 covered us all with a lot of darkness.

This year, 2020 uncovered the ugly white supremacy hiding just out of sight beneath the surface,
systemically written into our policies and rules, laws and codes.

This year, this season of Advent let's sing the Prophet's song of justice,
ring the prophet's bell announcing a new day coming.

Prepare the highway in your hearts, the highs to be brought low,
the low places filled in and lifted up.

Prepare the highway of your hearts, the twists and turns that nauseate the stomach,

to be made straight.

Prepare for costly construction projects as we adjust to God's rule in our hearts.

But what a blessing, the highway of our Lord.

Prepare the way of the Lord.

Overlook, overcome, withstand the resistance within us and out there in society.

For Christ brings God's rule, and that is what its all about.

Let us join in *ringing out the darkness in the land*.

Ring in the Christ who is to be.

"O blest is Christ who came in God's most holy name." (GTG #106)

O blest is Christ who comes again.