

“Are We People of the Way?”

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Can you believe that we are only eight days into the four weeks of Advent preparation for Christmas? This year’s calendar is a little different, so we don’t actually have four weeks. When the first Sunday of Advent began, we were only twenty-three days until Christmas Day. Today we are only sixteen days until Christmas Day. We wonder how that can be possible, but it’s true, only fifteen shopping days until Christmas Day. Dave Berry once said, “Once again, we come to the Holiday Season, a deeply religious time that each of us observes, in his own way, by going to the mall of his choice.” He’s a bit dated now. It might better be said that each of us observes our deeply religious time by feverishly browsing the internet for the best buys where what we buy is free shipping or we can pick it up in reserved parking lot. Someone else said that there is nothing wrong with all our getting ready for Christmas because it toughens us up for the January sales. By the way, here’s my letter to Santa: Dear Santa, I’ve been a very good guy this year and what I want for Christmas is <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B072M3FC42?aaxitk=>. Well, surely Santa can get it to me more efficiently that way. Anyway, if we weren’t rushed enough, now even the season seems to plot against us. But wait, pause here with me for a few minutes! We need to take time to take a deep breath before we rush head long into the little time that’s left.

“Prepare the way of the Lord” is the Advent candle symbol today. The theme is the prophetic reason for the season. We need to pause to see why there has always been, at least since Jewish Babylonian captivity such a hubbub about the arrival of a Messiah. Of course, we know now, that the long sought for outcome among Jews was a new old kingdom like the ancient Davidic empire. They hoped, too, for a new old monarch, perhaps a warrior and shepherd king like David himself. Yet, as might realize, preparing the way for empire and king for the prophets could only be clouded hope for the future. Indeed, always remember that the role of the prophet was not to be a fortune teller, but a sign reader. They anticipated from their circumstances and their inspiration what would most likely happen given their knowledge and faith in God. But as time went on, things

became more confusing, more complex, and even more inconclusive. There was bad leadership and powerful enemies. Only the most radical divine intervention would make any difference any more and that's what they wrote about. The problem is that what they wrote about was perceptually impeded by their culture. That, too, presented its own problems. As a result, the people rejected their message. Their question was this, "if we are the chosen people of God, then why have we are being carried off into captivity?" The prophets' message assured them of two things. One, they had broken their covenant with God, but two, get ready for it, God would restore the kingdom and a king, even if it only is meant for a remnant of the Jews who survive the judgement.

Yet, on second thought, it was a mis-constructed way forward, not a erroneous message, just mis-constructed.

By mis-constructed, I mean, is that the major and minor prophets were often limited in their access to the Word of God, that is the temple, or especially the ark of the covenant. Bible teachers tells us that when Israel had first-hand access to the Word of God, there was no need for prophets. However, when kings failed them, and conquerors took them into captivity, the Word of God was taken away, too. It's probably a good idea for us to remember that, too, even in our time. There are other ways to take the Word of God away from the people than stealing the sacred box it is contained in. Only the prophets who had a reliable memory could speak for God. "Thus, saith the Lord," was a prophetic appeal to the Jews to heed God even in times when the temple was destroyed, or the Word of God was wrestled from them. For example, the reading from Jeremiah and Isaiah during Advent reminds us of how true that was. Both Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, and Isaiah, the royal prophet, longed for a new day—a new empire, a new king, and an everlasting peace. Little did they know that their words would become the framework for something different than they could ever imagine

So, on this Advent, we ask the question our sermon suggests. We think of ourselves as confident preparers of the way. We are all something like the prophets in some ways. We have studied this story so often and so deeply that we must have it right by now, don't we? And, yet, if the Jews of Jesus's day who were so prepared by history, and prophesies, and the right place, and right time, missed the message, is it possible that we who are in the western church might miss something about his coming, too? It occurred to me that it might be possible that we might possibly work so intensely to prepare the way of the Lord, when in fact, when he comes, he might choose another way to which we might be considerably obvious!

Isn't that what happened in the first Christmas story? The whole story is replete with ways for the Lord to come for which few if any had prepared. Mary was a young child, humble, both in spirit and in poverty and yet God chose her as the servant of God's only begotten son. Joseph was from the yeoman class but God chose him to care for Mary and protect her until Jesus was born. The shepherds were among the poorest and rankest of the society, yet God chose them to tell the good news of Jesus's birth. Then there was the cave for animals where Jesus was born. The Word of God is no longer stone tablets in a sacred box, but a baby born in a manger. Strange, don't you think. But it fits how God often chooses to act in history. So much in the narrative that you and I could not have possibly have even imagined. And, yet it did but it was not the most likely way for a king to come, nor for an empire to emerge. The narrative continues without the benefit of royal occasion or elegant balls. Had we been in Bethlehem on that night, would any of us have run to the stall to see it as the birthplace of a king. Ludicrous, we would say, ludicrous! Kings aren't born in mangers. Or, are they? This one was.

So, how then can we, limited prophets that we are, prepare the way for a kind of Lord that might be so easily missed in the first place. Jesus had preached for three years, performed countless miracles, confronted the institution of his day, and somehow his very own disciples missed him—even while they were with him. Remember when Thomas asked him during the week of the Passover about the way. How do we know where you are going, he asked, and how can we know the way? Is it possible that any of us will ever get it completely right?

I think the answer lies in how we understand the question. If we think that preparing the way of the Lord is our choice about how and why Jesus comes into the world, then we will most certainly be wrong. If we think that to prepare the way is to choose what we think is the best way across the human landscape is the right way, then again, we would be wrong. And, if we think that the way of the Lord is a means rather than the end, then we will also be very, very wrong. Preparing the way of the Lord in its context is about creating an authentic connection between where God has been and where God is going. The word in the New Testament, where John the Baptist is preaching, means making things ready. Preparing the way of the Lord is the spiritual activity of preparing the community where we live about the relevancy of Jesus.

We don't need to overthink it. Just look around and you will see the way everywhere you look. When we say "Merry Christmas! At the check-out" instead of happy holidays. We are making things ready. When we hang the star on the

tree, we are preparing our community, too. Every string of lights asks all who see them to ask why now, and why all the lights. With every extra meal cooked, every stranger fed or given a new coat, every gift purchased for a person without family members to share, we are making things ready. With every friend we gather with in restaurants and concerts in our finest dress, we are making ready. Maybe even when we leave a 20% tip this time of year, we are also making ready. By demonstrating grace, mercy, and justice as essentials in our society we are connecting the a past with a future with God in it.

With every Christmas card you write, you are not exactly dreaming of a white Christmas in Beaumont, Texas, but you might be thinking about what a better world we would live in if everyone wrote the words “May your days be happy and bright” enough times that they would come to believe it, and even practice it. All these actions and attitudes tell the story once again and offer our community a new way of being.

I know, so many of these things we do are just culture, maybe rich in western culture, but I believe this. If we can keep holding on for a little longer, even when people are telling us that we are in a post-Christian culture, then getting things ready for the coming Christ is something not one of us can leave off doing. Do you realize that all the prophecies about the coming Messiah were made at times in history when the Jews thought that their culture of faith was done for? I believe that there is still hope even when in our culture we discover that only a handful of us still say “Merry Christmas”, or even only one hangs a string of lights, or puts a star on the top sprig of a plastic tree. For it is in that very moment of utter desolation and despair that the Christ of our Christmas story may show up in the most unexpected way. Maybe, then the message is not so much about preparing the way of the Lord as it is preparing us for what his coming will mean for us. Like so many people along a parade route we prepare the way with our place stationed where Christ will pass right near us. We are all like Zacchaeus who prepared himself along the way by perching in a tree. While all the time the way of the Lord was leading to his house that very day.

We can't miss it. We won't miss it! We are, like all the prophets, great and small before us, preparing the way of the Lord.