

You did it! You prepared the way!

First Congregational Church, Branford
December 16, 2018; Matthew 3:1-12
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In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight." '

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

*(During the Gospel reading, John the Baptist as a homeless person enters sanctuary, with two plastic bags, wide eyes - looks around at everything: people, balcony, wreaths, listens to liturgist (has fun with it!), focuses on **font**, altar, Advent wreath, pulpit)*

You did it!

You prepared the way!

Is this the prophet's perch?

Alrighty then! Oh, you should've seen me 2,000 years ago yelling my head off in the wilderness!: *Prepare the way! Prepare the way of the Lord! God is coming!* And, then he did! Can you imagine that?!

And, now look at you, you prepared the way for Christ to live here. You did it, you're here, you prepared the way. Let me hear from you, come on, speak up, what else do you do that lets people know that Christ is here in this church?...

(what congregation said: \$1,700 collected for Community Dining Room, Food Pantry - feeding the hungry; Take a Vet Fishing - caring for vets; took care of a refugee family, got them an apartment... John the Baptist comments on each)

Okay, that is terrific, just what Jesus would want. **NOW**, let's get down to the nitty gritty, which is right where I live - this one is just for you to ask yourself - *what do you do to prepare your heart for the Christ to come into it?* You should know, I'm a repentance guy - a real *turn your whole life around* kind of guy. Not a, I'm sorry I did that, and then I'm just going to do it again tomorrow! A real changing of the heart, you know? *That's* how you prepare your heart - get rid of the brambles - brambles stick your heart *and* the hearts of others. It's just not good to go around all prickly with people. Life is short. I should know! *Life is short.* [be kind]

Let me tell you about my life before I turned it around - I used to treat women very poorly - very, very poorly - my mom, women on the street, girlfriends - sure, it was the culture of the day to treat women like you'd treat your dog, but I was really bad in my verbal and physical assaults. One day I got a message from Above that I needed to stop doing that, so I did. I started to respect women. And, stopped thinking I was better than them. I became a new person after that. How could I tell everyone else to repent unless I had?! I'm no hypocrite. Treat women with respect!

I passed prophet Suzanne in the hall and she was confessing to me how judgmental she is. Now, mind you, that's just a hazard of the profession, but she says it creeps into her personal life, that she can be too judgmental and corrective with her husband and son... that it hurts them... it hurts their hearts - the people she most loves. Being prickly with them. She knows she needs to sweep that out, turn it around, smooth out a heart that can be prickly with briars and thorns. It won't be easy. *She'll have to ask God to shine more love and acceptance in her heart.* She

also knows she can't tell you to let go of your sins if she can't! You can't have a preacher whose a hypocrite! There's nothin' worse than that, right?!

So, how about you - anyone care to share a repent, turn around moment?....
Oh, come on - hasn't anyone turned around?! Gone from being one way to being something else? I know you're just shy. Maybe you'll just tell me, one on one.
That's okay.

Don't get me wrong, let me tell you something my dad, Zechariah once said - this is beautiful: "*in the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.*" You know what that means? That means that God spends more energy healing broken hearts and attending to wounds than *crushing the world with an iron fist!*

God has more love than he has judgment. God has a heart that loves and loves and loves.

Let me tell you - you should've seen him.
There was somethin' about him. Jesus was both masculine and feminine - ya know? He drew you in. He had this great light about him. When I saw him it was a real *fall on your knees* kind of moment. *I mean, he was the one I'd been telling about!* And, he was so humble. I mean, he came to *me* to be baptized. God himself. I just couldn't believe it. You know what that did? - it affirmed that what I was doing was good - baptizing people and preparing them for new life in him... *He* thought I was good. And, he loved me.

He's worth all this, you know.
He's worth handing your life to him.
If he's come to you, you know that. You know his peace.
If he hasn't yet, open your heart, and he will.
That's a promise.

I'm proud of you, church, proud of you for preparing the way.
Look at this place.
You've got something good going on here.
The way you share together, sit together, sing together.
Thank you that my words didn't die in vain.
You prepared the way.

Before I go, let me remind you that preparing doesn't mean making perfect. You're never going to be perfect, neither is your church, and your new settled prophet won't be either! Ya gotta allow everybody to be broken. As a voice hollerin' out in the wilderness, I think that's probably the most important thing I could ever say about the life of the church, and all your relationships. We need to accept one another's imperfections, and mistakes, *spend more time lovin' than criticizin'*. It'll change the world! More love, less criticism, **less judgment**. I'll tell Rev. Suz!

Well, I'd best be getting on. I need to go visit some other churches - see what they're up to - before they close up shop this morning. But, first, I noticed this big, empty bowl over here.... seems a shame not to be ready... (take water bottle from bag and pour...)

Prepare the way!