

Made Ready for Jesus

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Preached on the Second Sunday of Advent, (6Dec), 2009.

Text: Luke 1:16-17

“And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” ~Archangel *Gabriel* to *Zechariah*, father of *John the Baptist*.

One of the most intriguing characters in the Bible: John the Baptist. I’ve been preaching sermons on him every Advent for almost thirty-five years, mostly about his message. Today I introduce you to the character himself and where he came from. Before he was born his life’s purpose was already charted. In adulthood John did not disappoint. He had a clear message. He insisted that things were not right and must be made so. We are surprised that so much that happens in the Bible develops over generations. That is the way it is in Scriptural imagination. Nothing happens randomly or on the spur of the moment. God prepares grandparents for the great work of grandchildren or even great grandchildren. Nothing sudden: the Bible is slow cooking to an extreme. Listen to what the Archangel Gabriel told John’s father Zechariah before his birth:

He will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God,
And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah,
To turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,
And the disobedient to the wisdom of the just,
To make ready for the Lord a people prepared.¹

These parents were already older, not the age to conceive a child. Though they intentionally remind us of Abram and Sarai, I guess they were not that old—just old for being first time parents. Perhaps they were my age. Zechariah was still working shifts in Temple duty in Jerusalem. His wife Elizabeth was related to Mary,² who had a surprise birth, too: John’s cousin Jesus. It certainly astounded Zechariah and Elizabeth; they had both long given up having children. Yet here was their conception announced by an archangel.

We note several things in Gabriel’s message to Zechariah about his prophet son. First John’s role was to return the children of Israel back to their God. (1) *Back*. We have a prejudice, thinking because we operate PDAs, the internet and touch-screen cell phones, we are also the first generation to figure things out spiritually. “*Back to their God*,” Gabriel said. The

¹ Luke 1:16-17.

² Luke 1:36.

wisdom of past generations is always where one starts in matters of faith. We must look back to solve the mystery of the present and future. There are no short cuts only confusing detours into areas most of us are unprepared for. To find the way we need grounding in past teachings. Isaiah knew this and called his own generation to a new relationship with their God:

You shall be called oaks of righteousness —[*not a quick growing tree, but a tree of enduring strength*]—the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified. They shall build up ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.³

John quoted Isaiah, because he, too, lived in a time when the old things had been forgotten and the nation was adrift. At best, Israel's spiritual past was in ruins. Isaiah called for his generation to rebuild the ancient ruins. Isaiah and John knew One was coming after them. If that One was to work a magic of grace, people had to look back to prepare themselves for the Messiah's work.

(2) Here is another interesting phrase in Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah, that John '*will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children.*' It was the contemporary generation in the First Century that had lost the way. It would be the children not the fathers who would actually lead them back to God. But there is also a tenderness to the words, that bespeaks the spiritual power connecting generation to generation.

(3) Gabriel foretold that John would work '*in the spirit and power of Elijah.*' John acted and talked like the earlier prophet who confronted the apostasy and eclecticism of Ahab and Jezebel.⁴ The comparison of John with Elijah is not a coincidence. Malachi, the last prophet in the Old Testament had predicted it, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. [*And listen to this!*] He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers."⁵

John's parents dedicated the boy to this holy purpose, keeping him away from strong drink⁶ and the sins of that age. In his twenties John migrated to the Judean wilderness⁷ where he fasted and prayed, read and studied the past, looking back and trying to discern his future mission. He had to be a man in his twenties. Older men do not have John's edge. He came out of the desert fulminating against sin, calling people to a new life, prophesying about a coming messiah, and adopting a ritual of baptism as a sign of godly living. Baptism is a ritual that existed in First Century Judaism, but it was always for Gentile converts coming into the faith.

³ Isaiah 61:3-4.

⁴ Elijah's story begins in 1Kings 17. Because there is no account of the prophet's death, only a story of his ascension into heaven (2Kings 2:12), the Jews believed he would return to usher in the messianic age. Hence, at their Seders each Passover, an empty seat is left for Elijah, and the promise (or hope?), "*Next year in Jerusalem!*"

⁵ Malachi 4:5-6.

⁶ Luke 1:15.

⁷ Luke 1:80.

There is no sign baptism existed earlier as a path the members of the tribe themselves had to undergo.⁸ But for John, baptism fit his message. Things were so adrift, that the people of Abraham had to be reconstituted. It was as if Israel had to start all over, back to something old, yet something new for that time.⁹ John had no desire to start something brand new. He believed his generation lost its way because it had forgotten the wisdom and faith of Abraham, Moses, Elijah and Isaiah. John knew the Messiah was just around the corner,¹⁰ and the only way to receive him was as people of renewed faith, who lived the commandments, and loved the Lord more than the world. It was a fool's errand, perhaps. "*No one believes in that old stuff anymore,*" he must have been told. Many must have advised him to tone it down a notch. He was so strident! Yet, he began to preach and the crowds flocked to him. Luke says, "they were on the tiptoe of expectation."¹¹ Contra all Gallup polls and common wisdom, the people did turn their hearts to the Lord and believed again.

Why should we attend to John and his message this December? We are at an age in the church when we need again to be made ready for the Lord, a people prepared. We are not. I cannot imagine that anyone could hold that our generation knows the way. We do not. We know many ways but not the way. We drift from fad to fad with little understanding of why past generations rejected these same options. This is always the line, "*Here is the new way!*" But inevitably the way was present in Ephesus in the First Century and at Shiloh in the Eighth Century B.C. Moreover, it is not just that our sins are not original. Faith itself and the revelation to our ancestors is equally ancient in its wisdom. It may seem like a bombshell when God occurs to us, but God's way is something more antique than any of us, this building, and our country. How can we understand it and apply its principles if we do not know its origins and early teachers? We believe in One who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. The Christian way whereon we walk is not an untried or uncharted road, but a road beaten by the footsteps of saints, apostles, prophets and martyrs. I thank God for the fingerposts and danger signals with which it is marked at every turning, and which may be known to us through the study of the Bible.¹²

We celebrate the coming of the Messiah at this time of the year. Are we prepared? Are we ready? John is still needed: a voice crying in the wilderness, "*Prepare the way of the Lord.*" Turn back to the faith of your ancestors, the old way always new. Parents, turn to your children. Children, turn to your parents. Clear the road of obstacles, for One is coming, and we must ready our hearts for him.

End

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⁸ With the possible exception of the *mikvah*, Leviticus 12.

⁹ Note John's "And do not say to yourselves, '*We have Abraham as our father,*' for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children of Abraham." (Luke 3:8).

¹⁰ Luke 3:16.

¹¹ Luke 3:15, in the New English Bible translation.

¹² From Baillie, John. A Diary of Private Prayer. (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1949), 25.