

DECEMBER 2ND – 10:30AM
SPRINGFIELD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
FROM THE VALLEYS TO THE MOUNTAINS

I. Jersey Born

I was born and raised in New Jersey, the most densely populated state. If we needed to get somewhere as a family, there would be three or four or maybe more different ways to get to our destination. The grid system of roads can be a beautiful thing. And sure, you'd occasionally get stuck in some traffic, especially at the summertime at the shore, but it was a very short lived angst.

The same happens here in Eldersburg. Sitting in twenty minutes of traffic on 32 because of road construction makes one think about lament, heightened anxiety at missing meetings, and your tax dollars at work. I can find myself singing, as Joni Mitchell sings, "Paved paradise, put up a parking lot." But, despite all that, I know that there are at least four different routes I can go to get from home to work – I can avoid 32 – for there's a whole road infrastructure that allows me to navigate around

construction. It's an annoyance, sure, but it's not the end of the world material.

Now, between Jersey and Maryland, I lived in Scotland. I was used to this setup – right? Three, four, or five different ways to get some place. And then I moved to the United Kingdom. And I was perplexed at first. Where were all the roads? Sure, Edinburgh had plenty of roads, but when you leave the city, your road options are minimal. In the United Kingdom, there are two main roads – one to the east and one to the west of the nation that go from north to south, and at different points, for long stretches, you're down to two lanes of traffic.

And yes, in America, there are certainly those long roads, miles and miles long, of green grass on each side. But right here, right now, that's not where we live.

II. Context

So, I want to pull you and your imagination into a different context, a different place – a place like Scotland or a place alike it where the world has a beautiful rawness to it, where the asphalt hasn't touched the hard earth. That's the world John the Baptist

lives in – not Scotland, although that would be cool – but rather, he comes from the wilderness. He eats locusts and honey and he knows the mountains and valleys because not only has he heard in history of them, he sees them in his landscape. And what a strange man for God to pick to be the messenger, the bearer of this good news, but look at Scripture, and look around us today, God always sends the unexpected.

So John has come from the wilderness, and speaks about this earthen language of mountains and valleys becoming level and paths being made straight, from the prophet Isaiah. And after all this is prepared, he says, in bodily language, ‘all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ Now, this, of course, has double meaning – preparation can be active movement and literal restructuring, but there is also a secondary meaning. This preparation of levelling out things is more than land – it’s about people too. It’s creating a true middle class, where poor and rich are divided no more, it’s about cultivating communities where race isn’t a dynamic that discriminations, it’s about challenging perspectives and perceptions on who’s in and who’s out.

This preparation that John is talking about, as he looks out on his landscape, comes from a Greek word, *metanoia*, which is

chock full of meaning. *Metanoia* is radical, uprising, mind-changing, reorientation stuff. John is calling to a full-bodied and earthed change – where you examine your life, your priorities, your values, and you prepare – you reorient, in a powerful way. On this Sunday of peace, John is ironically calling for us to push ourselves to prepare in revolutionary ways. Ironically, again, John wants you to feel uncomfortable with this change and transformation and action – and maybe then, maybe peace. But you’ve got to rock the boat first.

III. What’s with all the names

I want to have a minor sidebar moment with you all here. So, this text is split in a strange way – the first is like a historical catalogue of famous names, and then we get into John speaking the words of Isaiah. It seems strange to pair them.

And often, I’ve found the difficult names challenging. It gets confusing, and difficult, and I’ve often wondered about the Biblical writers, ‘did we have to go into that much detail?’

But we do. And here’s why the names from Luke 3:1-4 are important. It’s easy to place Biblical history and ‘general’ history

as opposing forces, or to separate them. But, in naming these names, it is saying to the people, 'You know your history, you know these people, and by naming them, I'm saying that Biblical and general history are one, not separated.' It's almost like proofing your work, by backing up what you're saying, in the time you are saying it.' To us, perhaps some of those names mean little to us, but it is crucial to realize that the initial readers of the text would know those names and be able to put John's words in a clear cut context.

IV. Back on Track

Perhaps that was a bit more than a sidebar...but still important. So, we know that what John is saying is rooted deep in history – from the names of rulers, to using the powerful words of Isaiah to talk about the one who is to come. We understand that John's way of preparation isn't as simple as it seems, but it is a profound change.

So, how will you and I prepare? In our own context, not in Galilee or the Wilderness, but in paved Sykesville, what paths do we need to make straight?

No matter where we live, is to live into the ideals of the candles we lit this morning. To remember the hope that Jeremiah spoke of, to live alternatively, to imagine a world that is different than our own, with equality and justice as the norm. This Sunday, we prepare for peace, we look at the world around us, re-evaluate our perspectives, shake up our world so that on that Christmas morning, peace is seen and felt with more clarity.

To prepare, one thing we do, alongside other traditions, is the important practice of forgiveness. In Greek, forgiveness translates into a meaning, which means, 'to let go.' And that's on both sides of the coin – we need to let go of what has been done to us, which does not mean to allow or accept an action, but to let go of its power in our lives. On the other side of the coin, we ask God, particularly within our prayer of confession, to forgive us for what we have done. Through unconditional love, we have a perfect example of what true 'letting go' looks like, as God receives and redeems us every week.

The call to prepare might look different for you this year. Perhaps preparing isn't forgiveness, perhaps preparing is reading more Scripture, praying more often, or having difficult conversations. The preparation for each of us will be different,

but the preparation none the less is important and critical as we wait for the Christ child. But preparing will definitely not be one thing: it will not be a performance, a check that the Christmas dinner is perfectly made and served, and the curtains hung just right. No, whatever preparing for you this season looks like to you – make sure it comes from every part of you, from your heart, mind, soul, and body – make the preparation count, for the day is coming, coming very soon, for us to welcome in that peace, the Christ child, into our lives. Amen.