

# Sermons at First Church

**A Ministry of the Word**  
**December 6, 2015**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Clarksburg, WV**

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**Luke 3:1-6**

*The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." (Luke 3:4 N.R.S.V.)*

## **Are You Ready?**

Every year as we are getting ready for Christmas, we read about John the Baptist. He bursts on the scene with his wild hair and stinking animal skins calling for repentance. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!" What does this wilderness dweller, this fire and brimstone preacher have to do with warm, fuzzy Christmas?

I am glad you asked. Let me suggest to you that the wilderness is not only a place. It is also a state of mind. In scripture the wilderness is a place of loneliness, of exposure to the harsh elements, of danger from the wild beasts. The wilderness is a place where every direction looks the same and it is easy to get lost and confused. Our English word, "bewildered," comes from this understanding of wilderness.

Let me further suggest that the opposite of "wilderness" is "home." Home is where you are safe and secure. It is a place of comfort, of belonging, of safety. It is where you most know who you are and what you are about.

It is not that much of a reach then to see wilderness as the place we commonly find ourselves in a fallen world. Home is what we find in Christ and in his coming at Christmas to dwell among us.

I invite you to journey with me a bit into this imagery. Wilderness is where we all too often find ourselves. We live in a world that seems to have lost the value of human life. Every time we turn on the television there is another shooting, another terrorist attack. We live in a world where drug addiction is common. We live in a world where illicit sex and the glorification of violence is dominates the big screen.

Of course there are bright spots here and there, but all too many of us are lost, lonely, confused, and tired. All too many of us are living in the wilderness. The clear message of John the Baptist is that the wilderness is not our true home. We are to repent, to turn around, to prepare the way of the Lord. We want to get out of this wilderness and back home again.

I find it interesting that John the Baptist uses ancient Hebrew poetry in his message. He quotes from the book of Isaiah the prophet. Isaiah wrote to the Jewish people in exile in Babylon. If you remember the story, the Jews were dragged away from their homes in chains. They were brought by the captors to Babylon. Their captors often taunted them, "Sing us another one of your songs of the old country."

The Babylonians said to the exiles, we have proved that we are stronger than your God. The fact that we could drag you here proves it. So here you are, this is now your home. And aren't you lucky at that. Because now you live in the center of the greatest civilization there ever was. Jerusalem is not your home anymore. This is your home. In the words of The Borg from the Star Trek series, "Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated."

No doubt, some of the exiles believed that lie. They gave up their old ways, they learned the language, they learned to fit in. They assimilated.

Yet there was a remnant that God kept for himself. This remnant, kept their identity as Jews, as God's people. They drank in the words of the prophet Isaiah. They dared to dream of a day when things would be different. They dared to dream and work for a day when they could go home.

Christmas, the coming of Christ, reminds us of the dream that we share. In the words of the old song, "I'll be home for Christmas, you can count on me . . . I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams."

Christmas represents for us the dream of living in the kingdom of God, of being home, of being safe, secure in our identities, joyful in our living. No longer shall we be bewildered, lost, lonely, depressed and defeated. In Christ the former things are swept away.

So what can we do when we get stuck in the wilderness of our day and time? Listen again to the words of John the Baptist. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

John the Baptist could be pretty harsh. Yet his message, for all its fire and brimstone, was a message of hope. He doesn't tell us that we have to get out of the wilderness on our own. Because we can't. Instead he tells us that we are to resist the lie. We are to repent, to turn away from the idea that the falleness of this world is our home. When the world says, "It doesn't get any better than this." John the Baptist says, "That is a lie. This is not your home."

John the Baptist urges us to prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight his pathways.

Not too long ago I was driving my dad to the doctor in Elkins. If you have ever been on the road between Helvetia and Elkins, you know that is one steep and crooked road. We got to talking about how many wrecks have happened over the years in some of those bad turns. One of the worst turns is just below my sister's house on Blue Rock Mountain. Right by the little Methodist church the road has a very steep and very sharp s turn in it. Dad observed that with modern

heavy equipment, it would not be difficult to straighten out these kinds of turns. He's right of course. It is sad that no matter how many people get stuck in that turn every winter, no matter how many bad accidents happen there, there never seems to be enough money, time, and determination to straighten out this killer turn. We are stuck in a rut.

One of the ways that we prepare the way for Christ to come into our hearts is to work on our priorities. How can Christ come into our hearts when our priorities keep us running away from him?

People have some strange priorities. One woman stopped at a yard sale. As she was going through the items, she commented to the home owner, "My husband will be really mad if he finds out I stopped at the yard sale."

The home owner, seeking to reassure her, said, "I'm sure your husband will understand when you tell him about how much money you saved."

The woman said, "Probably not. He broke his arm and I am supposed to take him to the hospital." (Dynamic Preaching, November 2015, pg. 60) It doesn't sound like her husband was very high on her priority list!

Then there is the story of the teenager named Bill. Bill was walking across a dark parking lot one evening when two young punks approached him. One of them held a gun, the other a knife. "Give us your wallet," said one.

Bill said, "No way."

The other young tough said, "You don't understand, this is a robbery. Give us your wallet or we will kill you."

Bill once more said, "No way." He kept walking.

Shortly the two punks gave up and ran off. When Bill was telling the story later to a friend, the friend asked, "Weren't you scared? Why didn't you give them your wallet?"

Bill said, "Yes, I was scared. But I wasn't about to give them my wallet. My learner's permit is in there." (Dynamic Preaching)

Messed up priorities are not always that easy to see, of course.

Many people in our society have bought the lie that, "It doesn't get any better than this." They have believed the lie that this fallen society is our home. Some are aware that their priorities are warped and crooked, but they are stuck in the rut. Like that S turn on Blue Rock Mountain, they know things should be straightened out, but they never get around to it.

The challenge that John the Baptist brings to us this morning is about making straight our priorities in welcoming Christ into our hearts. The fact that you are here this Sunday morning is a good start.

Let me end this sermon with a quote that I found on facebook of all places.

“If you want to keep Christ in Christmas,  
Feed the hungry,  
Cloth the naked,  
Forgive the guilty,  
Welcome the stranger and the unwanted child,  
Care for the sick,  
Love your enemies.”

May these be the things we are doing when Christ comes again!

Amen.