**Preparation is Key**

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The American inventor Alexander Graham Bell famously said, “Preparation is the key to success.” Another well-known American, Benjamin Franklin, said something similar: “By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.”

Preparation is the key, whether you are hanging wall paper or gearing up for a job interview or getting ready to take the SATS. Students who show up on exam day without adequate preparation will be toast! If athletes want to excel on game day before big crowds, they must prepare when no one is around.

Ever since the 6th century, Christians have devoted themselves in Advent to a season of preparation. When I was young, my family marked the days of Christmas with an Advent Calendar. Each day we opened another window in the run-up to Christmas. I would invariably open the Christmas Day window first just to sneak a peak. That’s pretty much what everyone does anymore. Forget Advent; bring on Christmas!

We prepare for two comings in Advent. We commemorate Christ’s first coming at Christmas, just as we prepare for his second coming, yet to come. I was 19 before it registered with me that Christ is coming again. Somehow, I didn’t get that memo. I tell you, someday we’ll wish we’d all been ready for Christ’s return.

We’ve been preaching a series of sermons for the better part of three months now called *Life is Messy*. As we discovered from Jacob’s life, messy people are precisely the ones God comes to redeem and save.

The world into which Jesus was born was messy, also. There were all manner of ruthless demagogues and bitter ethnic rivalries. Life in the Roman Empire could be brutish and cruel. Yes, life is messy, even at Christmas.

Luke begins his gospel with a story about Zechariah, who serves as a temple priest in Jerusalem. There were thousands of such priests in those days. Zechariah’s wife, Elizabeth, also originates from a priestly lineage. She is a direct descendent of Aaron, Moses’ brother, the first priest of Israel.

Each day, a different priest is chosen by lottery to burn incense at the temple to atone for people’s sins. You can do the math—with an unlimited supply of priests and a limited number of days some priests
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Zechariah is chosen for this once-in-a-lifetime honor. His family and friends are there the day Zechariah performs this sacred ritual. As Zechariah is going about his duties, an angel named Gabriel suddenly appears. “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard” (1:13). What prayer? Luke has earlier told us that Elizabeth and Zechariah are unable to conceive children. Could Zechariah be praying for a child at a time like this? Given that Zechariah and Elizabeth are well beyond the child-bearing years, it’s more likely he’s praying for something cosmic like world peace or the salvation of Israel.

Gabriel continues, “Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son and you are to name him John” (1:13). He will be a prophet in the tradition of Elijah who “will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children” (1:17). This last line is taken from Malachi, the last book in the Old Testament. His mission will be “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (1:17).

Zechariah still has his doubts. After all, it’s a little late to be thinking about kids. So Zechariah asks Gabriel for proof, to show him some sign. Even the most devout among us need some reassurance from time to time.

“You want a sign, Zechariah. I’ll show you a sign,” Gabriel says. “You’ll be rendered speechless until further notice.” That’s not exactly how Gabriel says it, but you get the drift.

Meanwhile, Zechariah’s family and friends are waiting outside, wondering what’s taking him so long. Zechariah finally emerges, looking like he has seen a ghost. When it comes time for him to give the traditional Aaronic blessing, he can’t utter a sound.

True to Gabriel’s word, Zechariah and Elizabeth conceive and give birth to a son. Everybody gathers at the temple on the 8th day for the customary bris ceremony, when boys are named and circumcised. Everybody expects him to be named after his father. But Elizabeth insists his name will be John. John? Nobody in the family is named John. They take the matter to Zechariah who, remember, can’t talk, so he writes on a tablet, “His name is John.” And just like that, Zechariah’s tongue breaks forth into song called “The Benedictus,” the first Latin word of the song. “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel who has raised up a horn of salvation for us…and you, child, will be called the prophet of the most high, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways” (1:68-76).

Fast forward with me 30 years; John has now reached adulthood. He is called John the Baptist, since baptism prepares people for the way of the
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Lord. John’s mission fulfills the ancient prophecy of Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the desert, Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in and every mountain and hill made low. The crooked road shall become straight and rough places smooth and all people will see God’s salvation” (Luke 3:4-6).

Highways in those days were notoriously crude and treacherous. Robbers would hide out in the hills to prey on unsuspecting travelers. Yet, when monarchs traveled those same highways, they were transformed into the king’s highway. Every pothole was filled in and every obstacle put out of the way when the king traveled such highways.

John’s clarion call endures: prepare the way of the Lord. Get rid of every obstacle that stands in the way of Christ’s coming. Like the mountains made low, God wants to bend our pride. Like the valleys filled in, God wants to fill our lives with new meaning. Like the crooked ways made straight, God wants to make a way straight into our hearts.

We’ve become so accustomed to singing familiar Christmas carols that we miss their intended meaning. Take the beloved carol, Joy to the World. The carol begins with the words, “Joy to the world! The Lord is come; let earth receive her King; let every heart prepare him room.” Is there room in your heart for Christ this Advent season?

There is a lesser known carol that communicates a similar theme. The last line of In the Bleak Midwinter expresses something comparable, “What can I give Him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; if I were a wise man, I would do my part; yet what I can I give him; give my heart.”

I’m still thinking about a funeral I conducted Friday for a man in his 40s, who died of a massive brain hemorrhage. He suffered his first hemorrhage at the tender age of 26, leaving his left side paralyzed. He stood here two years ago to share his Minute for Witness. This is what he said, “I expected by this point in my life to have a nice, corporate job; maybe even a corner office. I somehow imagined myself to be married with children. I pictured myself to be of robust health, engaged in all sorts of recreational sports…Okay I don’t have the cushy job or corner office. I am single and living with my parents on disability…I have not been cured of my disability. Lord knows I have prayed for it. But I will tell you what faith has done for me. I have, with God’s grace, let go of living the life I expected to live. I have decided instead to live the life I have been given.”

Stop dreaming about the life you want to live. Stop envying the life someone else is living.
Start living the life you have been given.

Today is Sunday, December 2nd. There are now only 23 shopping days until Christmas. Here we go again, another round of Christian letters to send out to let everyone know how busy we have been. Then there are those obligatory office and holiday parties to attend. Whatever you do, don’t commit the social faux pas of calling them Christmas parties. Don’t you love our new traditions? Thanksgiving Day has become a time for families to gather outside a Wal-Mart to get a good deal on a flat screen TV.

You’ve got 23 days before this Christmas goes the way of most good intentions. Will you let another Christmas come and go without preparing room in your heart for Jesus Christ? Why not make this Christmas different; less commercial and more Christ-centered? Before your holiday becomes crazy busy, I’m inviting you to prepare your heart for Christ’s coming.

I have two suggestions for those who want to take up this challenge. One has to do with eliminating obstacles and the other concerns incorporating new practices into your life.

First, eliminate obstacles that are blocking Christ’s way into your heart. Maybe it’s a nagging resentment or bitter disappointment you can’t seem to shake. Perhaps it’s an obsession or secret addiction that is sucking life out of you? Maybe it’s what people called in a former day “a deeply besetting sin.” What is your signature sin that is killing you softly and robbing you of joy?

Second, what do you need to incorporate into Advent this year? Why not add a new spiritual practice into your closely guarded schedules? There are all sorts of practices to help center your Advent preparations this year—prayer, Scripture reading and meditation, service, solitude, Sabbath-keeping and worship to name a few. You can pick up our advent devotionals in the lobby or access them on-line to help you get started.

Prepare the way. Prepare the way of the Lord. Prepare the way of the Lord straight into your hearts.