

“PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD”

Isaiah 40:1-11, 2 Peter 2:8-15, Mark 1:1-8

December 9 & 10, 2017

Leroy Eims tells about visiting a foreign mission field and talking with a veteran missionary: He told me a story that still haunts me; I can't get it out of my mind. He had gone overseas some 15 years before we met and began the usual programs. About the time he arrived on the field, he met a young man named Johnny, who was involved in something quite different.

Johnny was a committed disciple of Jesus Christ, but he was going about his ministry in all the wrong ways according to the "book." In contrast to the typical missionary approach, Johnny was spending the bulk of his time meeting with a few young men in that country. The veteran missionary tried to get Johnny straightened out, but the young man kept on with his "different" approach. The years passed, and the veteran missionary now had to leave the country of his service due to new visa restrictions.

As he sat across the coffee table from me in his home, he told me, "Leroy, I've got little to show for my time here. Oh, there is a group of people who meet in our assembly, but I wonder what will happen to them when I leave. They are not disciples. They have been faithful in listening to my sermons, but they do not witness. Few of them know how to lead another person to Christ. They know nothing about discipling others. And now that I am leaving, I can see I've all but wasted my time here. **Then I look** at what has come out of Johnny's life. One of the men he worked with is now a professor at the university. This man is mightily used of God to reach and train scores of university students. Another is leading a witnessing and discipling team of about 40 young men and women. Another is in a nearby city with a group of 35 growing disciples around him. Three have gone to other countries as missionaries and are now leading teams who are multiplying disciples. God is blessing their work. I see the contrast between my life and Johnny's, and it is tragic. I was so sure I was right. What he was doing seemed so insignificant, but now I look at the results, and they are staggering."¹

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publications, 2003] pg. 71)

Preparing the way of the Lord often looks very different than what is going on in ministry today. It takes hard work, multiple hours and much encouragement to develop disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. It takes more than just inviting them to church, or to a study group. It takes more than just the one hour a week that most people spend at their local congregation. Making disciples for Jesus takes regular contact, often daily, encouraging and building and challenging that individual to grow deeper in their faith. It means stepping out of the “normal” routine of church to build into a life so that faith might deepen and grow. It means intentionally investing yourself into the life of another person so that they might understand what the Lord desires of them, enabling them to find faith in Jesus Christ and then live in a way that makes Him known to those around them.

This is the second weekend of Advent, and we are looking at how to prepare for the coming of the Lord Jesus. The Old Testament lesson of Isaiah 40 (1-11) calls us to let the past go in our lives, but to focus on what is ahead and prepare to live for the Lord. Isaiah says, “*A voice cries out, ‘Prepare in the wilderness a road for the Lord! Clear the way in the desert for our God! Fill every valley; level every mountain. The hills will become a plain, and the rough country will be made smooth. Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind will see it. The Lord Himself has promised this’*” (40:3-5).

Here we have a formula for making the preparations in our own lives for the Lord Jesus to come. Clearing the way in the desert means getting rid of all of those things that distract us or endanger us or lead us away from following the Lord. Whatever it is that might make you stumble or become sidetracked needs to be gotten rid of. In the desert it would be the boulders, the cactus, the snakes, the coyotes and the scorpions. In our own lives its things like the media: TV, computers, internet connections, Facebook, SnapChat, Twitter, video games or other social media. It could be the “extracurricular” activities that take us away from the family. It could be the overtime hours at the job, or the hobbies that we have, or even the overabundance of stuff in our lives. Whatever it is that distracts us or hinders us from focusing on the coming of the Lord,

Isaiah says, “Get rid of it – clear the way!”

And he offers solutions to how that can be done. He says to “*fill every valley; level every mountain...*” Wherever there might be a void in our lives, we are to consider filling it with the ways of the Lord. Instead of entertaining ourselves into unconsciousness, we are to engage in deep study. Let’s fill our minds with positive and uplifting information rather than just jelling out in front of a monitor or screen. Read a good book on discipleship, or challenge yourself in reading a chapter a day from the Bible. Fill your mind with the goodness of the Lord.

Then, whatever is consuming your time and energy, those mountains, begin spreading out that time and energy in areas that have been lacking. Spend time with the kids, or grandkids. Take a walk with your spouse. Develop a new habit of **talking with each other face to face** rather than through the many devices we have. Use your minds to consider a new community project, or solve a problem, or meet a need of a neighbor. Engage yourself in activities that enrich your life AND the lives of others.

Then Isaiah boldly tells us, “...*go up on a high mountain and proclaim the good news! Call out with a loud voice...announcing that good news! Speak out and do not be afraid. Tell the towns...that their God is coming! The Sovereign Lord is coming to rule with power...*” (40:9-10). We have the great Good News of Jesus Christ the Savior, and instead of following the popular demand to keep our faith to ourselves, let others know about the saving power of Jesus for anyone who will believe in Him. We live in a country that is dying for Good News! With all the corruption and cheating and killing and perversion surrounding us, our WORLD needs to hear that God loves us enough to make us brand new creatures in Jesus Christ, if we take the time to seek Him. The old has passed away; the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). Lives can be transformed IF WE BUT TELL OTHERS ABOUT JESUS!

And that’s the message of our Gospel lesson today of Mark 1:1-8. (READ Mark 1:1-8)

We have this great Good News of Jesus right here in our hands and hopefully in our hearts. It’s ours to share with others. It’s ours as we claim Jesus as our own Savior and accept

the work He has already done for us. God sent His own Son into the world so that we might have a chance at being restored into His presence. Jesus came as the perfect sacrifice, and He willingly gave of Himself so that the price of our sins would be paid in full and we would be restored to holiness once more. This enables us to stand before God unashamed and not guilty anymore because Jesus has claimed our sin, paid the penalty for that sin by dying on the cross, and wiping out all that would prevent us from becoming a part of the family of God again. Jesus came to free us from that bondage of sin that would enslave us so deeply as to drag us down into destruction forever away from God's presence. WE ARE SET FREE BY THE SON OF GOD, JESUS CHRIST! Isn't that GREAT NEWS? And it is the greatest news that the world needs to hear, but the Lord relies upon US to take that GOOD NEWS to those around us so that it might begin to transform the lives of many.

And that's what John did. John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, became the herald of good tidings of GREAT JOY by proclaiming that the Messiah was here on earth. He was different than the other representatives of God. John didn't fit as a Pharisee, wasn't a part of the Scribes, and was not a priest or a leader in the Temple. God was doing a strange thing by spreading the news of the coming of Salvation in the world through a man who was doing things quite differently than what the "book" said ministry should be done like.

John didn't build a mansion to live in – not even in a house or a lake-side cabin. He didn't surround himself with the luxuries of the world – he had no carpets, no tapestries, no expensive pictures, no landscaping, no toys or hobbies, no comfortable bed, no fireplace, no silverware, no furniture, no fancy chariot. He didn't satisfy his hunger with the richest of foods or drinks – he stuck to the basics of grasshoppers and honey. He didn't even invest in comfortable clothes! All he had was the warm and durable camel-hair coveralls.

John isn't even listed as ever having a full time job, though what he did as his **occupation** was extremely questionable. He went out into the wilderness to proclaim a message of hope and love and peace and joy found only in the Messiah who was to follow him. John took it upon

himself to share the news that there is hope beyond the struggles and trials and hardships of this world. John went out calling the people to repent of their past, give it back to the Lord, and claim the new life that He has for them in the Savior, Jesus. He invited the people to turn away from their sinful practices in this world and to begin to focus on the blessings and wonders that the Lord God had already established in the world. John invited the people to transform their lives from being against God to being found in God's favor.

The baptism that John presented was that of transition. In repentance, a person decides that he or she is ready for something new. They have seen what their life was like living on their own with their own wisdom and knowledge guiding them. They have seen the hardships and trials that come from depending only upon themselves. They have seen how easily it is to turn away from the ways of the Lord to indulge in the ways of the world. They've seen all this and they desire a new life, a clean start, wiping away all the junk of the past and dedicating themselves into living differently from that moment on. Just as a bath or a shower cleans the dirt and sweat and grime of the day off of us, so the baptism of water was the outward symbolization of cleaning the soul of all of the dirt and worldly filth becoming clean from all sin. It was a fresh start – a new creation, redeemed by the confession of sin and forgiveness of God.

But John was not the one making the new difference in the lives of the people. John invited the people to come back to God, recognizing that there was another One after him that would be much greater than he; One who would bring complete renewal through the work of the Holy Spirit. John saw Him as so great a redeemer that he was not worthy to even be His servant, taking off His sandals and washing His feet. He recognized that he was not the Messiah, but the One coming after him WAS THE MESSIAH. And his part was to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord so that they would be able to receive this new Messiah with open arms, open hearts and ready minds. John wanted the people to become alert to the fulfillment of the promise of God to provide a Savior. And that took all of his time, all of his energy and consumed his whole thinking. Everything he did was to touch the lives of those around him to help them be

ready for the coming of Jesus, the Son of God, the Savior of the World. John worked to begin the process of the redemption of Israel, starting at the Jordan River and going all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, and his baptism was the beginning of the reconciliation of the peoples.

But guess what? That is God's desire for us, too! We are to be the ambassadors for Jesus Christ giving our time and energy to the Lord's service so that the people of our time might also become prepared for the coming of Jesus. As you look around, see the ones who are wasting their lives away in worthless living. See the ones who are working themselves to death for the stuff of the world. See the ones who are craving power and authority so much that they will do whatever it takes to get that position. See the ones who have no clue about who Jesus is or what He has done for us just living their lives away that only leads to destruction. See those who are so confused or believe twisted theologies that they end up killing themselves in order to earn heaven. There are myriads of people who need to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ before it's too late. Who will take that Good News to them? You're right there in the midst of them – why not YOU take that Good News to them?

I pray that you would begin to look out to the people around you and see them the way that God sees them – the lost, the drug addicts, the slave masters, the work-a-holics, the trapped, the lonely, the hurting, the ignorant and the wise, the churchd and the unchurchd, the blue-collar and white-collar workers, the CEOs, the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak, the healthy and the sick. **THEY ALL NEED TO HEAR THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS SO THAT THEY MIGHT FIND NEW LIFE THROUGH HIM!** And it starts right here, in this place, with each of you claiming the faith of Jesus and then being willing to proclaim that faith to those around you.

Prepare for the coming of the Lord Jesus, and help the others around to you to be ready, too, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.