

**“Prepare the Way”**

**Luke 3.1–6**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 7 Dec 03**

Last week, we talked about anticipation and expectation. And I addressed those ideas in pretty positive terms: that Advent is a season in which we live with not-yet-completeness and a yet-to-be-ness. Still, people have lived with expectations that are out of whack, that don’t pan out, that are not what God has in mind. There’s an old Yiddish saying: “If you want to make God laugh, just tell him your plans.” Thankfully, God is willing to work with us, even when we don’t have the plan quite right.

The folks in Judea were unprepared for what they were going to get about 2,000 years ago. They read Isaiah and Jeremiah and expected a messiah, a pure and upright descendant of David, a king, a generalissimo (or at least a military leader), even a politician, some kind of a leader for God’s chosen people.

This is what they expected: if they were going to write a want-ad in the Bethlehem Times it would have read something like this: “WANTED: Someone to get the Romans out of our homeland by any means necessary. QUALIFICATIONS: familiarity with military conquest or guerilla warfare; deep hatred of anything Roman; know the political ropes; must be a direct lineal descendant of David. Good family connections and personal wealth are a plus.”

So, how do you think they wound up with Jesus of Nazareth? I feel pretty sure that their expectations went unmet. I have a hunch they weren’t prepared for someone:

- ☪ who was dirt poor
- ☪ whose parents were unmarried
- ☪ who was without any political power or influence
- ☪ who had no military background, save that of being under the boot of Roman *imperium*
- ☪ who welcomed the untouchables of his day: women, children, Gentiles, sinners, and tax-collectors.

This is the hometown boy they got, instead of a Jewish superhero. And many of them weren’t prepared to accept someone who didn’t fit the qualifications in the want ad.

Even the old priest, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptizer has the same illusions about who Jesus is. We read it responsively in the canticle this morning: Zechariah expected “a might savior” who would save us “from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.” (Gee, do think he could be referring to the Romans and their army of occupation?)



So, who are we prepared to accept? For whom do we preparing the way?

- ☪ You know that portrait of Jesus with blondish hair and blue eyes that used to be in a lot of churches. I refer to that image of Jesus as the Christ of unexamined faith. Is that who were expecting?
- ☪ Is it the Jesus who has been tamed and domesticated by the church and society for 2,000 years?
- ☪ Is it the sweet babe of Bethlehem, “the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes?”
- ☪ Is it the Jesus who is misused to justify the oppression of women, non-straight folks, and people of color?

☘ Is it the Jesus used by Western imperialism as a force for subjugation of indigenous peoples?

We are in a fortunate time in the history of liberal Protestantism, because we have volumes of top-rate scholarship on the historical Jesus: the flesh-and-blood man of Nazareth who walked and talked and taught and preached along the shores of the Galilee. And if there is one thing we know, it is that Jesus was a social revolutionary bent on non-violence, who came to proclaim “a kingdom of nuisances and nobodies.”<sup>1</sup>

The renowned Irish-American Jesus scholar, John Dominic Crossan, writes that the kingdom is about “discerning how, here and now in this world, one can so live that God’s power, rule, and dominion are evidently present to all observers. One enters that kingdom by wisdom or goodness, by virtue, justice, or freedom. It is a style of life for now rather than a hope of life for the future.”<sup>2</sup> (Dom Crossan will be speaking in Boulder at First Congregational in the beginning of February, by the way.)

Are you ready for a Jesus who

- ☘ said that the poor are more blessed than you?
- ☘ might tell you to give everything away?
- ☘ promoted a sense of justice that would probably leave you cold?
- ☘ hung around with street people and junkies?
- ☘ calls you to give of yourself to benefit others – even when it hurts?
- ☘ tells you that you should turn the other cheek when someone bloodies your face?

I’m not entirely sure that I’d be comfortable coming face-to-face with that kind of Jesus – especially at this year, when we like to think about the quaint, rustic scene of a babe laying in a manger, with ox and ass and shepherd and magi, all come to adore him. It’s an easier image to take than the rough, dusty, revolutionary Jesus, who came to turn the world upside down and point a new direction, God’s direction, for the way things ought to be.



So, what are we called to do to prepare the way for the Lord? What changes do we need to make in our lives to welcome the Christ spirit into the world. How do we “let every heart prepare him room?” (Or is there no room in the inn today, as well as in Bethlehem?)

Last week, you made some suggestions on ways we might be like John the Baptizer, preparing the way. You did it through your visions, dreams, and prophecies. We’ve printed your responses in the bulletin (at least the ones we could read), and I have to say that I was really moved by what I read. They are beautiful, profound visions. [READ SOME] The writer of the book of Proverbs records that, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”<sup>3</sup> And clearly, we have visionaries and prophets in our midst.

So, how are you going to prepare the way of the Lord? How are you – yourself – going to become an instrument of God to help live out – and live into – your dream and vision? It can be overwhelming, which is why we are here together, instead of off by ourselves on this Sunday in Advent.

An old Japanese proverb, sent to me by Dave Tenney, says that “Vision without action is a daydream. Action without vision is a nightmare.” We are more likely to let our

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<sup>1</sup> a phrase from John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 56

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 29.18 (KJV)

prophecies turn into daydreams, unless we have the conviction to do something constructive.

As we come to the communion table, which is a miniature model of God's kingdom, where all are invited to the banquet, let us feel the resolution and conviction to prepare Christ's way. *Amen.*