

EXTREME MAKEOVER: WORLD EDITION

Get Ready for Radical Remodel

A sermon offered by the Ruth Hopkins
December 5-6, 2009 • Second Sunday of Advent
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Isaiah 28:17

I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line...

Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

***"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord...'"***

Luke 3:4

When Bob and I were packing for our move to Springboro, I had planned to be very Martha Stewart about the entire endeavor. We would pack our things in plastic tubs; each tub would be neatly labeled and color-coded to a different room in the house. I would hang up charts in each room showing the different colors and a floor plan of where each piece of furniture went. Well, you know what happened. We got busy, threw things into those tubs at the last minute, no labels, no color coded charts, and no Martha Stewart. I think that there are still a few tubs that we never got around to unpacking – they just tagged along on our next move. So much for preparation.

John the Baptist is calling us today to prepare. It is really too bad that the reading from Luke stops where it does, because while we get the message to prepare – John really doesn't say how to go about it. Until later, and his method can be summed up in one word. Repent.

And you thought Lent was the only time we did that sort of thing! No, Advent is another prime time for self-examination and reflection.

While we are busy wrapping presents, baking cookies and cleaning the guest room, in walks this nomadic, unshaven, crazy-eyed prophet, calling us to pause a bit and reflect.

No one has the time for this, of course, and most of us ignore his message, with the justification that we are just too busy to look at ourselves right now.

We *are* very carefully scrutinizing our homes, however, for the tarnished silver, the scratch on the dining room table, the guest room curtains that are looking faded. Worse, we are all too carefully looking over others, judging them over the turkey, or counting the Christmas cards we gave but did not receive.

So it's not really that we are too busy to prepare – for we are preparing all right. Just not in the right direction.

John gives us that right direction. To prepare is to repent. Why should we listen to him? Well, first off, he is Jesus' cousin. But even more importantly, he's coming from wilderness.

Ah, wilderness, that place where we so often seem to be in the Bible. And where God so often seems to be- the best place for an extreme makeover. The Israelites wandered in it, Moses experienced God in it, Jesus was tempted in it. You can trust what comes out of the wilderness.

This is good news, for we often find ourselves in the wilderness, lost, tempted, wandering. Life starts to feel like a long stretch of parched land, and we get so tired of the journey. We take so much with us as we go – old hurts, bad habits, our tubs full of stuff we can't even remember, but we keep lugging it around. It makes our trip so much harder.

But look at John, he marches right out of the wilderness with nothing but the ratty clothes on his back to give us a word of hope. Prepare. Good things come from the wilderness. There is a way out of the desert.

To be fair to Luke's text, this is not really John speaking; it is a quote from the book of Isaiah. These verses depict a country in exile, and urge the people to get ready. Luke says Salvation is closer than ever – the makeover trucks are getting ready to roll.

And they will be rolling right into Roman occupied Judea.

Now that is a problem. Because here is a government that sees extreme makeover as an exercise of force. You can and will be changed for the better, and you will call it peace. There is no call to readiness here, only the fearful anticipation of Roman feet marching down Roman roads.

Luke is telling Rome through John, our woolly prophet, that this oppression will not last, that a greater king with a greater kingdom is coming. John is doing some serious demo work – peel away the so-called peace, and you see tyranny. Peel away the so-called justice, and you see oppression. Peel away the fancy titles of an emperor, and you see a man, demanding worship. This foundation will not stand.

John urges the faithful to shake off their weariness, wake up, and embrace the wonder of God's faithfulness. John asks the faithful to throw off the dusty coverings of faith, and get ready for newness of life.

John is calling us as well. We lose our edge. We get comfortable and lazy. We get complacent about our Christian practice, our witness to the world.

All too often we let Rome off the hook. We look away at blatant discrimination. We shrug at the suffering of the poor. We accept the rise of violence. We are weary, as if we had no strength at all.

When we feel this weariness, we often turn to prayer. But even then, our prayer life feels like a small bedroom – only enough space for ourselves and our loved ones, while the whole world needs our prayers. When we are moved to action, our work feels like the old treadmill in the basement – the one we must move boxes to get to, get on only when we happen to weigh ourselves, and then feel defeated when we know our measly 15 minutes of exercise isn't nearly enough.

Yes, we need an extreme makeover; we need to get back to the basics, to the studs, to the foundation. You can't put up new drywall while the old is still there. The pipes must be laid before the marble sinks go in.

For the extreme makeover to begin we need to let go. Clean out the old for the new.

Now is the time. It is time to drop those old hurts that are threatening a relationship. It is time to throw out some bad habits, physical or mental, that keep you separated from God.

It is time to sit in silence, and be with your wild, wilderness. This is not easy, for like Moses, you may experience Godly things. It is hard to sit with yourself, love yourself, accept your wilderness and make it holy. But it is holy - good things come out of the wilderness, you are one of them. It is time to travel light.

Traveling light, we, like John can walk out of that wilderness with open arms, ready to receive new life, we may even have that same crazy gleam in our eye.

Traveling light, unencumbered by the stuff of the world, we can pick up the tools to mend it, to work for the coming kingdom on earth. Traveling light, we will emerge from the wilderness ready to move, refreshed, forgiven.

As Christians we live a strange faith. We live our ancient story out year after year, anticipating Jesus' birth, waiting with Mary, celebrating his birth as if it just happened. In Lent, we walk with Jesus through Holy Week, from the wilderness to the cross, all the while living as resurrection people. We pray for the kingdom to come, while we live and work for the kingdom now. We are perfected and unfinished, guilty and pardoned, in exile and at home.

Today we live our ancient story through our communion meal, knowing when we gather; Jesus is with us, in some eternal past/present/future, with all the saints before us and after us. He was, after all the most extreme makeover – the strong foundation, stripped down, dying, nailed up for all to see. The most extreme makeover of all, for all. And we are made over as well, for we belong to him. In this strange faith that we claim – Jesus calls us, and sends us – we belong to him, we belong to each other – the love of Christ draws us together, as it propels us out. The ancient story, this ancient meal, gets us back to our foundations, renews us to abundant life.

It is through this ancient story that we find our meaning, our confidence, and our strength. It sustains us through all of our many radical re-dos, and gives us a small taste of the big reveal to come.

Now I know it is getting on towards Christmas, and I am not going to tell you to stop your cooking, shopping, and cleaning. Enjoy the season in all its secular glory. But travel light through it. Keep the crazy gleam in your eye; keep your arms open and unencumbered. Prepare for them to be filled with the gift that truly does keep on giving, the gift that never weighs us down, and lives in us, with us. The gift that keeps our arms open even as it presses close to us. Prepare for the love of Christ, coming into the world.