

## **“Prepare the Home”**

### **Luke 3: 1-6**

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent—December 9, 2012

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### **Introduction**

We continue our journey in the gospel of Luke and in the sermon series on Preparing the Way; today’s sermon focuses on preparing the home. The Second Sunday in Advent always focuses on John the Baptist, the one who prepares the way for the coming of Christ. In Luke, the gospel writer carefully situates the proclamation of John the Baptist in the Jewish story and history, as well as in the Greco-Roman power structure. Luke wants to make the point that Jesus’ arrival is an in-breaking into the story of the community of Israel and the powerbrokers of Rome.<sup>1</sup> For that reason, the author of Luke puts words from the book of Isaiah into John the Baptist’s mouth. John the Baptist is like a prophet, trying to prepare the people by reminding them who they are, and then proclaiming about the one who is coming.

### **“Prepare the Way of the Lord”**

#### **Luke 3:1-6**

##### **I. Preparing the Home**

I wonder how many of you this week have been decking the halls. How many of you have been putting up Christmas trees, hanging wreaths, and setting out nativity sets? I wonder as you hang up heirloom ornaments and set out decorations if any of you have felt nostalgia for Christmas past? As you decorate, does any of that décor hold meanings deeper than the stocking or the reindeer ornament itself? Do any of you get flooded with memories of home, home as it once was, home as you remember as a child?

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose, “Reflections on Luke 3:1-6” [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)

I wonder if for some of you decking out the house with all those memories reminds you that this Christmas is different than Christmas homecomings in the past. Perhaps this year children aren't at home, or adult children aren't coming home with treasured grandkids. Perhaps this year there has been a significant death in the family, and that person's absence makes the holly and ivy feel a little blue and droopy. Perhaps this year someone has lost a job, and there's not enough money for presents. Perhaps this year there has been a divorce, and the discussion about where the children go on Christmas Eve breaks hearts. Perhaps this year as you hang that reindeer ornament and the special handmade stocking, your heart is filled with longing---longing for a sense of home, longing for things as they once were, longing for home when home actually was happy.

John the Baptist, the one speaking forth our text for the day, knew he was talking to a people who knew about longing for home. He's trying to tell his audience that God has an amazing home for their hearts, that God is preparing a home for them. That home is named Jesus Christ.

To talk about this homecoming, the coming Savior, John uses a text his audience would know by heart, like a beloved Christmas carol. He uses a text from the Old Testament, from the book of Isaiah chapter 40, because he knows this is a text of homecoming. This is a text that speaks to a people with longing in their hearts for home. In order to really understand all the nuances and references John is making with this Isaiah text, we're going to dive in and explore its geography.

## **II. Longing for Home—Isaiah 40**

In the context of Isaiah 40, the people of Israel are a long way from home. They are in exile in Babylon around 540BC. If you look at the map with "Babylonian Kingdom" on it, you'll see pink, orange, and green lines showing how the Jews were captured by the

Assyrians in 586-598BC, and driven away from their homes through foreign lands. They were forced to leave Jerusalem in rubble and ruin. For hundreds of miles they were forced through Syria, up and around the Arabian Desert, and into modern day Iraq. Eventually the Assyrians were defeated by the Babylonians, and the Jews were pushed to Babylon. The Jews in captivity feel full of doubts of God's promises. They long for a home that no longer exists. They long for things the way they once were, they long for a home in which they were actually happy. They wonder where their God is, if God has indeed abandoned them.

Into the depths of their homesickness and longing, the prophet Isaiah speaks to them "Prepare the way of the Lord!" With assurance in his voice, Isaiah offers that God will make a path through the desert for them to return home. This exile won't last forever, the people will go on a second exodus. Like their ancestors of old departed from slavery in Egypt, so they too will leave and enter again into Zion. "Get ready," Isaiah says, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" **(John sings "Prepare ye the Way of the Lord" from balcony- softly- mezzo piano)**

### **III. God is at Home**

The hearts of the exiles begin to hope a little. Perhaps God still is alive, at work in their lives, even as they live so very far from home. Indeed, in fact historically King Cyrus of Persia will soon conquer Babylon. Cyrus believed in appeasing the gods of the people he conquered, and allowing them to return home if the gods and people don't lend him their support. The people of Israel can begin to think about preparing the way to go home.

But then they wonder, "will God even be there if and when we do arrive back in Jerusalem? Will anybody be at home? Will God still be with us?"

The prophet Isaiah speaks tenderly to his people, and tells them that God will be there. He does this through a geography lesson through their beloved homeland. Turn back

to the map of Judah and Babylonia. The Jews often thought of Yahweh, their God, as having a residence Mt. Sinai somewhat close to the tip of the Sinai peninsula. When Israel wandered through the desert after escaping Egypt, the people believed that God swept down from Mt. Sinai and delivered them safely to the promised land. In the cultural imagination of Israel, then, God comes from his distant place on Mt. Sinai to aid his people in times of distress.

In keeping with this vision, in Isaiah chapter 40, the prophet proclaims, “Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” He is describing Yahweh leaving Mt. Sinai, and sweeping up the peninsula, going to the east of Bozrah into the Arabian Desert—this is God’s highway back to Jerusalem. It is a way familiar from the Temple traditions—that God would come into Jerusalem from Sinai.

The prophet goes on to describe God’s journey back home when he says, “every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places shall become a plain.” Turn now to the map of the geography of Palestine. Imagine the path of Yahweh, from the desert to the east. Then God must traverse the Eastern Hills, which has lots of valleys. These are the valleys the prophet Isaiah imagines being lifted up, to be a smooth path for Yahweh. The mountains, Mt. Pisgah and Mt. Nebo, shall be made low, so that God can easily traverse them on his way into Jerusalem. God must then cross the Ghor Plain, and then more valleys, or *biq’a* in Hebrew, must be crossed. This hill country is the “rough place” that must be made plain. Finally, the glory of the Lord will sweep into Jerusalem. Zion will once again be a place where God dwells and worships. God is at home, the prophet is proclaiming. To a people still in exile, the prophet is saying, “God is coming back in town. Your fortunes will change. Before you even can begin to pack your bags, know that the Lord is coming from Mt. Sinai.

Home will be restored. Prepare the way of the Lord back into Jerusalem!” **(John with confirmands sings “Prepare ye the Way of the Lord”)**

#### **IV. God is at our home**

When John the Baptist proclaims, “Prepare the Way of the Lord” in our text in Luke today, he is referencing all this Jewish history on this scripture---the exile to Babylon, the hoped-for return of God to Jerusalem, and then the people’s return from exile home. He is evoking all these senses in the Isaiah text of longing, of homecoming, of desire for a particular land and topography, of longing for God to be home. John the Baptist is then adding to that, that God is coming again to Jerusalem, sweeping into the city—or at least nearby in Bethlehem, in all God’s glory. This time, however, God is coming not as Yahweh in a cloud, but as a God incarnate, a God-baby born into a manger. John the Baptist is using this text from Isaiah to say that Jesus is on his way—prepare the way in your hearts for him, for he is coming home.

John the Baptist continues to proclaim this to us now—Jesus is coming, prepare your homes and hearts for him. No matter what your home will look like this Christmas, no matter how the stockings are hung (or not), no matter which loved ones will be there or not, Jesus is already coming home to your place, to your heart. Home can be happy because God is making a homecoming. You will not be alone. You will be redeemed out of whatever exile you’ve been in. No matter what your Babylon looks like, you can trust that there is a way out of that desert. There is a way to hope, love, peace, and joy once again. That way is named Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. So this advent, prepare your home not with holly, and ornaments, and stockings. Prepare your home to receive the Christ who has come, is coming, and will come into your life. Prepare the way for the Lord! **(John, confirmands, piano sing “Prepare ye the Way” with exuberance and joy!)**

