

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on December 21, 2014 at Victory of the Lamb on Mark 1:1-8.

Series: A Long Time Coming
Today's Focus: The Forerunner

“Clear Out the Lane for (Christ)mas”

In the name of Jesus Christ who is the greatest gift from the most generous Giver to a world of the most desperately needy people. Amen.

Two weeks ago we played our first church league basketball game of the season. I'd been looking forward to it for a while because I love getting to play basketball. Our basketball league is one of the things that helps me get through the winter. Except that I noticed something this year. The first play of the game a guy on the other team shot the ball and I had my guy boxed out, and I jumped up, except he jumped up over me and got the rebound. Clean play. No foul. I just couldn't jump as high as I thought I could.

And a couple times when I had the ball on offense I made a little juke move and tried taking it down the lane to the hoop except that I didn't make there. One time I got the ball stolen by a much bigger guy (who was wearing pink shoes by the way!) of whom I thought, “Surely I can get past this guy.” Another time I got past my guy only to find the lane clogged with other tall defenders preventing me from getting to the rim and forcing me to take a tough fade away jump shot. And we lost the game. Nothing came easy. Maybe I'm slowing down a little bit but it was hard to get into the lane for a clear shot. Big guys who could jump were always in my way, blocking my path down the lane to the hoop.

Friends, what's blocking the lane of your heart? If you're not a basketball fan I understand that might be an unusual question. But in a way that's what our sermon text from the Bible today is about. That's what the mission of a man named John the Baptist was all about. You see long ago God's people were waiting for a messenger sent by God would be the forerunner of the Messiah. In the Scriptures they read that this forerunner would be a bold prophet like Elijah of old. But it had been a couple hundred years of silence. A couple hundred years since the last prophet of the Old Testament era, Malachi, had spoken. And then out in the wilderness there was this man, sent by God, named John. And his mission? To preach. Not to make people feel all warm and fuzzy on the inside. Not to entertain them with all kinds of humorous stories. Not to tell people only what they wanted to hear, but what they needed to hear. To preach the law and the gospel in that order to clear out the lane of people's hearts and prepare them to welcome Jesus Christ. Listen to what God has to say to you today...

¹*The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,* ²*as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:*

*“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way”—*

³*“a voice of one calling in the wilderness,*

*‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”*

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

So what was John’s message in a nutshell? “*Prepare the way for the Lord.*” Friends, are you prepared? In the Old Testament prophecies that word *Prepare* means to clear away, or to clear out. The idea is that there are obstacles in a person’s heart to welcoming Jesus. There is rugged terrain and crooked paths and barriers in our hearts that block us from being able to celebrate Christmas rightly so that it becomes something other than a joyful celebration of the coming of Jesus Christ our Savior from sin.

Friends, what’s blocking the lane of your heart? What needs clearing away? Perhaps you think it’s just your calendar. It’s so cluttered right now with events and appointments and to-do lists and shopping lists and year-end projects that you don’t feel that you have time to truly prepare your heart to worship Jesus now. Or you feel so stressed by the obligations and responsibilities enforced by your calendar that you can’t much well recognize the peace and joy he came to bring. Friends that’s not good. It’s not healthy if your calendar is so full that it blocks you from being able to slow down for even one second to let Christ into your heart by pondering anew God’s love for you. So by all means, clear out your calendar. Clear away the clutter that doesn’t matter. Clear a lane in your heart for Christmas!

Yet I suspect if you’re like me that your cluttered calendar is just one of many excuses, somewhat valid mind you, that you’ve grown accustomed to using in order to ignore the real obstacles in your heart.



You’re looking at the outward, external things in your life that you can easily blame so that you don’t have to look into your heart to see what’s inside there that looks like this {pic}. This is a picture of terrain in the country of Nepal—one of the places where we are actually going to be helping missionaries through our More Than Bricks campaign. Now does it look easy to travel across that kind of terrain? Absolutely not, right!? If you look closely you can a hiker in a blue coat. It would not be a simple, easy matter for him

to cross that gorge or climb over that mountain in the distance. But John the Baptist’s mission was to help some of us see that this is what our hearts are like for welcoming Jesus. Jesus wants to come into your heart this Christmas but in your heart is terrain not so easy to traverse. So the prophet Isaiah said John’s message would sound like this: ⁴ *Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain* (Isaiah 40:4).

What does this mean? It means some of you have a mountain in your heart that needs to be leveled. It’s rough and rugged. You’re full of pride. You’re so easily angered. Nothing is ever good enough for you.

You're a complainer. You easily find fault with other people and you don't think twice about sharing how you feel about them. You look down from your mountaintop perch upon others. You think, "Why don't other people get it?" "Why doesn't so and so understand?" Or you perhaps think you're really not so bad and your need for God is minimal compared to everyone else because you think, "I'm a pretty good person" as if God were a God of the pretty good and not the perfectly holy one.

Or maybe instead you've got a steep valley in your heart. Like a gorge, your sins run deep. Perhaps there is something in your life right now that you know from God's Word or your conscience that its wrong and yet you've grown accustomed to blaming others for it or covering it over with thoughts like, "It's ok to keep doing what I'm doing because I've got good reasons." Or "As long it doesn't hurt anyone else" or "As long as I can find some people who will say it's all right." Perhaps there is something you've been covering over so long and now today for the first time you realize you need to come clean before God.

"Prepare the way for the Lord" John says. Clear out the lane of your heart. Because if you don't, you won't be ready for Christmas—no matter how many gifts are under the tree, no matter how cookies that you made, no matter how much volunteering you have done, and this one's for me...no matter how many sermons that you've preached the last couple of weeks. And that's why God promised to send a forerunner like John. Because how does God do the work of preparing our hearts? Through preaching. Preaching first the message of the law to point out our sin and that's why the first sermon I need to preach is the one to myself. And part one of this sermon that I preach first to myself needs to be undiluted, full strength, law. And when you think about it, you know what the Law of God is like? It's kind of like an earth mover.

Right now as a church we own a nice piece of land just down Loomis Rd. It doesn't have any mountains or valleys on it. But what is it right now, at this moment, today? It's *unbuildable*. It lacks the necessary infrastructure. It's full of weeds and some wetlands. I look at it and it's easy to see that it's got a lot of potential but it's got some spots with poor soils. So guess what? We can't just put a building on it bada-boom-bada-bing. So what has to happen first? The site has to be prepared. Dirt has to get moved around. Grading needs to be done. Infrastructure needs to be put in place. So come April, hopefully the winter isn't too long this year!, you'll see a big earth mover out there, clearing away the bad soils, re-grading for new elevations, protecting the wetlands, and putting in the necessary infrastructure all in the expensive effort to make sure that the building we build will stand firm on solid, level ground.

So here's this guy John the Baptist. The forerunner of Jesus Christ. He comes seemingly out of nowhere and he's out there preaching in this barren, kind of depressing wilderness area. But you see that's kind of what you want your heart to be...in order to be prepared and ready to receive Jesus Christ as your Savior. Just like before you build a building you need to clear away the obstacles and prepare the site so that the building can stand. So God sends us preachers like John to point out your sins that block your relationship with God and each other so that God might clear away the lane of your heart for Christ. God uses the earth mover of his law to make your heart a desert so that Jesus can come and turn it into an oasis.

Now I'm guessing some of you might think this sounds too good to be true. You see the obstacles that block the lane of your heart and they look too formidable. You take the temperature of your heart and you feel too cold towards God and his word. You hear John say, "Repent" and you're not sure that's even something you can do, like it's just one more impossible burden God is laying on you. Perhaps it seems like you're so far over here from God and you think, "How can I ever walk all the way back over there to him?" But here's what repentance means. People often think it's this long walk back towards God. But it's not. It's just a turning away from sin back toward God. You see Jesus is already there waiting. Always right there. The Lamb of God who came on that very first Christmas in order to take away the sins of the world.

How can you clear the lane of your heart for Christ? By repenting of your sins and, if you've been baptized, by reclaiming the blessings of the promise God made to you when you were baptized. A promise which is pure grace. When through the water and word of your baptism, God placed his name on you, washed your many sins away, and made you his dear child. When God gave you the Holy Spirit to connect you to Jesus your Savior through faith and to set you free. When he cleared away your sins and paved the way for your sanctified progress as a person. So repent, reclaim God's forgiveness, and rejoice in your Savior.

Are you ready for Christmas? I'm not asking that to stress you out by making you think of all the things you want to do yet before Wednesday! Rather to simply put this into perspective. There might be all kinds of things you feel you need to do to get ready yet. But in reality the most important thing is what God wants to do *in* you today. And the very way he does it is through preaching and his word. He wants to clear out the lane of your heart that you would be able to welcome Christ who comes to give you the victory over sin! Amen.