

The title of this morning's sermon is, "*Prepare the way of the Lord.*"

We have interrupted our verse-by-verse study through Luke's gospel for a special Christmas message...that is also in Luke!

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On November 30<sup>th</sup>, Ron DeSantis, governor of Florida and presidential candidate, debated Gavin Newsom, governor of California. Governor DeSantis criticized the way Governor Newsom prepared San Francisco for China's president, Xi Jinping's, (pronounced she-jin-ping's), visit.

Governor DeSantis held up a map of San Francisco that showed areas Governor Newsom wanted cleaned up. Because it is so disgusting, I won't tell you what Governor Newsom wanted cleaned up from the streets of San Francisco, but I will read part of what Governor DeSantis said:

"When a communist dictator [came] to town. Then [Governor Newsom] cleaned up the streets. [He] lined the streets with Chinese flags. [He] didn't put American flags there. [He] cleaned everything up. So, [he's] willing to do it for a communist dictator, but [he's] not willing to do it for [his] own people."

Governor DeSantis was upset Governor Newsom prepared San Francisco for a Chinese president, but not for the American people.

I mention this because it is a present-day example of the practice described in this morning's verses: preparing for the arrival of an important or powerful person. In our day, we do it for presidents, and in the ancient world, they did it for kings.

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The Old Testament repeatedly prophesied a king was coming...

When Jacob was blessing his twelve sons, he said to Judah:

**Genesis 49:10 The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.**

In ancient times, scepters represented a ruler or king's power. This is a prophecy a king would come from the tribe of Judah.

Jesus is the fulfillment of this prophecy, which is why he's called the Lion of the tribe of Judah.

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We learn more in David's day when God made a covenant with him about his son:

**2 Samuel 7:13 I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son...16 And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever."**

Jesus is the fulfillment of this prophecy, which is why he's also called the Son of David.

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Listen to the way the angel Gabriel described Jesus' birth to Mary:

**Luke 1:32b The Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."**

Gabriel told Mary that Jesus' birth was the coming of the prophesied King.

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The Old Testament also prophesied what people were supposed to do when that King came:

**Isaiah 40:3 A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.”**

This describes what happened in the ancient world when kings came...

They sent messengers, or forerunners, ahead to announce their coming. The people would begin preparations. They would get busy picking up trash and cleaning up the town until it was good as new...or at least as good as a town could be in the ancient world.

The people also prepared the roads to the town so the king would be comfortable while he was being carried in his coach. People would fill in potholes, smooth out rough spots, flatten hills, fill in valleys, and straighten out curves.

When the king arrived, messengers ran ahead shouting, “The king is coming! The king is coming!” Banners waved, and people lined the streets cheering as the king made his grand entrance.

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Now, let’s be honest about something that might bother you ...

I’m talking about kings being spoiled and coddled. All these poor people are already working hard to stay alive. The ancient world was a tough place to live. Now, they are using resources and spending time to pamper a king...who is already pampered.

So, you’re thinking, “This is what Jesus wanted? I don’t like the way this makes him sound. Didn’t Jesus say...

**Matthew 20:28 “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”**

But as we listen to this, we think, “This sounds like the coming king is being served a lot and not serving much.”

I have told you many times before that we get into trouble with scripture when we interpret physically what should be interpreted spiritually.

For example, when Jesus preached the parable of the two builders, was he really concerned about the foundations of our homes and whether they’re built on rock or sand?

No, he’s concerned about the foundation of our lives, marriages, families, and whether they’re built on something firm – a rock – or something shifting, like sand.

In the Parable of the Sower, was Jesus really trying to help us agriculturally by making sure we don’t throw seeds on paths, shallow soil, or thorny areas where it won’t grow?

No, he was concerned about whether our hearts are fertile for God’s Word.

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And these verses are similar, and this brings us to lesson one...

**Lesson One: Jesus wants heart construction versus road construction.**

I think we know Jesus didn’t really care about roads and towns being prepared for him, because there’s no record of him walking around saying, “Man, these roads are terrible. Why didn’t anyone fix things up for me? Look at all the trash on the streets. Couldn’t anyone have done a simple walkthrough and picked up a bit?”

The people had to get ready for Jesus. It was so important God sent a man – John the Baptist – ahead to prepare the way for him. But that preparation wasn't physical. The preparation Jesus wanted – and still wants – is spiritual. Jesus didn't care about having better roads to walk on, but he did care about people having better hearts to receive him.

And this is what we sing...

*Let earth receive her King; LET EVERY HEART PREPARE HIM ROOM, and heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing, and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.*

These lyrics are all about preparing our hearts to receive the King!

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And we see exactly how to do this in this morning's verses. Look at Luke 3. Most of your Bibles probably have a title. Something like, "John the Baptist Prepares the Way."

We can see what John the Baptist did to prepare the way for King Jesus 2,000 years ago, and it's the same thing we do to prepare for his coming today.

**Luke 3:2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**

Now, if we interpreted these verses physically, versus spiritually, which is to say we interpreted them incorrectly, what would we expect John to say?

*"The King is coming. Pretend like you have family coming over for the holidays! Pick up all the trash. Clean up the town. Make it look as good as new. Prepare the roads. Fill in the potholes. Smooth out the rough spots. Flatten the hills. Fill in the valleys. Straighten out the curves."*

Instead, what did John do?

He baptized people!

That doesn't seem like it has much to do with preparing the way for a king, does it?

So, let's briefly talk about this.

The Greek word for baptize literally means immerse or submerge. This is why John spent his time in the region around the Jordan so that he could immerse people in the water.

The type of baptism John performed differs from the baptisms we perform when we baptize people in the name of Jesus. We baptize people so they can identify with his death, burial, and resurrection. But Jesus hadn't died, been buried, or resurrected yet.

Let me show you two examples in Acts revealing people had received John's baptism but hadn't been baptized in the name of Jesus. Please turn to Acts 18:25.

**Acts 18:25 He (this is Apollos) had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though HE KNEW ONLY THE BAPTISM OF JOHN.**

Apollos hadn't experienced a Christian baptism yet.

Look at Acts 19:1:

**Acts 19:1 And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. 2 And he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” 3 And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John's baptism.”**

They had only received John's baptism. That wasn't enough, so look what happened...

**Acts 19:4 And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.” 5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.**

So, they had their second baptism to identify with Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

I had you turn here for another reason. Acts 19:4 tells us something else important John said that isn't recorded in Luke. He commanded people to “believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.”

Even though Luke doesn't record John commanding people to believe, from Acts 19:4, we can tell he was doing that when baptizing.

So, we prepare the way for Jesus by believing in him.

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Turn back to Luke 3.

You might be asking, “If John wasn't performing a Christian baptism, what was he performing?”

The answer is in **Luke 3:3**:

**Luke 3:3 And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming A BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE for the forgiveness of sins.**

And this brings us to lesson two...

**Lesson Two: Prepare the way of the Lord by (Part One) repenting.**

This is the first step of preparation. Jesus wanted hearts prepared for his coming, and nothing is more important than repentance because nothing prepares hearts better than repentance.

John told people to clear away the trash and rubble of sin. Get the garbage out of their hearts.

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Notice the end of verse 3 says...

**a baptism of repentance for THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS.**

If people listened to John's message, believed in Jesus, saw themselves as sinners and repented, they were baptized to symbolize the washing away, or forgiveness, of sin.

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I also want to take this opportunity to exhort you regarding baptism...

If you are a Christian, you are commanded to be baptized. It isn't a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, like John performed. But it is a baptism that shows you have repented and received forgiveness of sins through faith in King Jesus. So, if that's the case for you, be baptized!

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Let's see the next step of preparation...

**Luke 3:4a As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness:**

You will recognize this verse and the following verses because they quote the verses I read earlier from Isaiah.

John the Baptist was "the voice of one crying in the wilderness." He fulfilled this prophecy so literally he spent his life in the wilderness...

**Matthew 3:1 In those days John the Baptist came preaching IN THE WILDERNESS of Judea.**

The verse continues...

**Luke 3:4a 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.**

We say John prepared the way of the Lord, because he said, "Prepare the way of the Lord." But he didn't prepare the way. He TOLD people to prepare the way. He didn't do the work. He told people to do the work. He didn't make the preparations. He told people the preparations to make.

And we see what those preparations look like...

**Luke 3:4c make his paths straight.**

We know we don't interpret this physically, so what does it mean spiritually?

**Lesson Two: Prepare the way of the Lord by (Part Two) providing a straight path.**

Let me illustrate what we should NOT do by sharing a story from this past week.

Katie has told me numerous times that Jake Motzkus and I are similar:

- She thinks we preach similarly.
- We both love God's sport.
- We generally think similarly.
- And the Lord has graciously protected us from having the height of ungodly men in Scripture.

And there's one more thing Jake and I have in common: our poor sense of direction. Jake once told me he is missing the part of the brain that allows him to figure out where to go. I am missing that part, too.

We are so bad together that one time, when we were driving back from Longview and wanted to stop in Kalama, I wouldn't say we got lost, but we got off at the wrong exit and didn't know where we were. When you consider Kalama isn't a bustling metropolis, yet it still got us turned around, you understand our struggle.

This weakness surfaced this past Monday night when I took Ricky to watch the Seattle Seahawks for his birthday. This is the third NFL game I have seen in person and the first in over twenty years. So, I'm not the biggest football fan, but I am a fan of my son, and I thought it would be thrilling for him. And it was, at least, until we left the stadium and I had to find our car.

The Seattle Seahawks' stadium seats almost 69,000 people. Ricky was gracious and never pointed out that 68,999 people probably found their vehicles before I found ours.

We kept moving from one person to the next, asking for directions. We probably talked to three or four or 17 people. One guy said, and I quote, “You want to go left, left, left, right, left, right, left.” I was lost after the third left.

If you could look down on us from above, our path probably resembled someone scribbling lines on a piece of paper.

And I mention all this, because this is what we are NOT supposed to do with King Jesus. Instead of lines all over the place, the verse says we “Make his paths straight.”

Don’t make it hard for him to reach you. Don’t spend your life running away from him.

Let me say it like this: make a nice, short trip for him. Remove any obstacles between Jesus and you.

Do you have any obstacles between you and Jesus? Is there anything that keeps him from reaching you?

So, if you want to prepare for Jesus’ coming, give him a nice, straight path to your heart.

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Look at the next step of preparation...

**Luke 3:5a Every valley shall be filled,**

This refers to low places or depressions in our hearts that need to be filled.

**Lesson Two: Prepare the way of the Lord by (Part Three) being joyful.**

Are we discouraged or depressed?

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The second beatitude...

**Matthew 5:4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.**

How do we reconcile Jesus saying blessed are those who mourn without being discouraged or depressed?

Jesus is talking about mourning over sin. He’s not talking about people who are constantly sad and melancholy.

Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit, which means it’s something that should be produced in our lives.

God wants us to have joy so much we’re told to have it even when suffering...

**James 1:2 Count it all joy...when you meet trials of various kinds...1 Peter 2:3 We rejoice in our sufferings.**

It’s a bad witness when Christians walk around joylessly.

People will say, “Man, I don’t want to be a Christian. Look how miserable they are!”

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Sometimes, we must do what Psalms 42 and 43 encourage: talk to our souls!

**Psalm 42:5 Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation 6 and my God.**

This is repeated two more times in Psalm 42:11, and then in Psalm 43:5.

God repeats himself when he wants to make sure we don't miss something, and we shouldn't miss the importance of talking to our souls.

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Have you ever heard that we should not listen to ourselves, but we should preach to ourselves?

In other words, when you're tempted to listen to yourself say:

- *My life is so hard.*
- *I'm so unlucky.*
- *Bad things keep happening to me.*
- *Why do I have it so much worse than everyone else?*

This is when we must preach to ourselves. We should say, like the psalmist...

**Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.**

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And if there's one time we should really have joy, it's when we celebrate Christ's coming.

This isn't my opinion. Joy is one of the themes associated with Jesus' birth...

**Matthew 2:10** When [the wise men] saw the star [identifying Jesus' birth], they **REJOICED EXCEEDINGLY WITH GREAT JOY.**

When the angel appeared to the shepherds...

**Luke 2:10** The angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news **OF GREAT JOY** that will be for all the people. **11** For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

This is even the basis for one of our most famous Christmas songs...

*"JOY TO THE WORLD, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King...JOY TO THE EARTH, the Savior reigns! Let men their songs employ; While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains REPEAT THE SOUNDING JOY, REPEAT THE SOUNDING JOY, REPEAT, REPEAT, THE SOUNDING JOY."*

So, if you want to prepare for Jesus' coming, fill up the valleys and strive for joy.

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Look at the next way to prepare...

**Luke 3:5b** and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

This is pride and self-righteousness that needs to be removed.

**Lesson Two: Prepare the way of the Lord by (Part Four) being humble.**

We shouldn't have high views of ourselves or think we are better than others. We should be teachable and able to receive correction.

Listen to this...

**Proverbs 3:34** Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor.

This verse is so important it is repeated twice in the New Testament...

**James 4:6 He gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”**

And again...

**1 Peter 5:5 Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”**

These verses are sobering because they don't say, “God doesn't give grace to the proud.” They say God “opposes the proud.” This means he works against the proud. The Greek word for “opposes” is *antitassō* (pronounced on-tee-toss-oh), meaning “to rage in battle against.” I don't know about you, but I don't want God raging in battle against me!

It makes sense that pride and humility are presented opposingly because pride says, “I'm good enough...I deserve...I earned...I should have...” but humility says, “I'm not good enough...I don't deserve...I shouldn't have...” People saying the latter become objects of God's grace.

It also says, “[God] gives grace” because grace is given versus earned or merited. It's not that humility earns God's grace. It's that humility puts us in a place to receive God's grace.

So, if you want to prepare for Jesus' coming – and receive God's grace – every mountain and hill should be made low.

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Look at the next way to prepare...

**Luke 3:5c and the crooked shall become straight,**

**Lesson Two: Prepare the way of the Lord by (Part Five) acting justly.**

Do we have any crooked dealings in our lives? Can people trust us? Do we do anything shady or deceitful?

The Greek word for “crooked” is *skolios* (pronounced skah-lee-oss), and it means, “perverse or wicked.”

**Psalm 125:5 Those who turn aside to their crooked ways the Lord will lead away with evildoers!**

Is there anything perverse or wicked in our lives?

If we want to prepare for Jesus' coming, we must repent of crookedness, or God will treat us like evildoers.

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The last step of preparation...

**Luke 3:5d and the rough places shall become level ways,**

**Lesson Two: Prepare the way of the Lord by (Part Six) smoothing out rough edges.**

The ESV says level, but most other translations, such as the NKJV, NIV, and NASB, say smooth.

Do we have any rough places or rough edges that need to be leveled or smoothed out?

I know I do. I can be aggressive and harsh.

**Philippians 4:5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand.**



We're even told to be gentle because of Christ's coming!

So, if we want to prepare for Jesus' coming, we must strive to smooth out our rough edges.

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Finally...

**Luke 3:6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”**

Jesus' name means "Jehovah is salvation." Jesus is the salvation of God. This refers to Jesus' first coming, because when people saw Jesus, they saw "the salvation of God."

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But In another sense, this can refer to everyone because all flesh will see Jesus:

- Believers will stand before him and see him as their Savior who died for their sins.
- Unbelievers will stand before Jesus and see him as their Judge who sends them to hell.

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To encourage you to look to King Jesus as Savior, let me conclude with this...

To everyone's surprise, when King Jesus came:

- There was nothing royal or extravagant about his coming. He was born in a manger.
- He didn't travel on smooth, straight roads worked on by people anticipating his coming. He walked on dusty roads between Galilee and Jerusalem like every other ordinary person.
- He didn't have a fancy entourage. He traveled with 12 men who were as simple and plain as him.

Like a king, he did end up with a robe, crown, scepter, and even people kneeling before him, but not like we see with other kings. Let me read the description so you see what I mean...

**Matthew 27:28 They stripped [Jesus] and put a scarlet robe on him, 29 and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand (to serve as a scepter). And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 30 And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. 31 And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.**

Jesus was a king, but at his death, he wore a crown of thorns, he was beaten with his scepter, and his subjects mocked him and spit on him.

So, let me remind you what we celebrate today...

We celebrate God becoming a man in the person of Jesus Christ. God in the flesh could have had any life he wanted. But Jesus came in a manger and left on a cross. He lived a perfect, sinless life so that he could die as our substitute and take the punishment we deserve so we can spend eternity in heaven with him.

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If you have any questions, or I can pray for you in any way, I'll be up front after service, and I'd consider it a privilege to be able to speak with you.

Let's pray.