



Lutheran Church of the Master  
Pastor David Kappus, Preaching  
Preparing For Christmas  
December 6, 2009 - Luke 3:1-6

Pastor John Ortberg was giving a bath to his three children. Johnny was still in the tub. Laura was out and safely in her pajamas. He was trying to get Mallory dried off. Mallory was out of the water, but was doing what has come to be known in their family as the Dee Dah Day dance. This dance consists of running around and around in circles, singing over and over again, “Dee dah day, dee dah day.” It was a relatively simple dance expressing great joy. When Mallory is too happy to hold it in any longer, when words are inadequate to give voice to her euphoria, she has to dance to release her joy. So she does the Dee Dah Day.

On this particular occasion her father was irritated. “Mallory, hurry!” he prodded. So she did. She hurried. But not as her father intended. Instead, she began running in circles faster and faster and chanting “Dee Dah Day” more rapidly.

“No, Mallory, that is not what I mean!” said her father. “Stop with the dee dah day stuff and get over here so I can dry you off. Hurry!”

Then Mallory asked her father a profound question: “Why?” Why did she have to hurry?

John Ortberg suddenly realized he had no answer. He had nowhere to go, nothing to do, no meetings to attend, no sermons to write. He was just so used to hurrying, so preoccupied with his own little agenda, so trapped in this rut of moving from one task to another, that here was life, here was joy, here was an invitation to the dance right in front of him--and he was missing it.

So he got up and he and Mallory did the Dee Dah Day dance together.

My guess is that most of you who are parents can relate. We can get so busy...we can have so many little things on our agenda...we can be so stressed out that we forget to do a little Dee Dah Day dance with our children.

Particularly at this time of year. Advent. Christmas. Parties to go to. Packages to wrap. Christmas cards to write. How does anybody ever get it all done? We can get so busy that we forget to reflect on the meaning of it all. That’s what I invite you to do for the next few minutes. Forget your outside cares and concerns. Pretend that you have nothing to do but reflect on the meaning of the coming of the Christ child.

Listen to the words of the prophet: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all humankind will see God’s salvation.’”

Here is the purpose of our gathering this day: to prepare the way for the Lord.

In your own way, some of you have been preparing for Christmas for several weeks. That’s why you’ve been so busy. Hanging lights, buying gifts, planning parties, writing cards and all the rest of the tasks that go with this hectic time of the year.

It's funny, if you didn't know better, you would think that retail department stores are the most religious institutions in our land. They've been preparing for Christmas since Labor Day. Usually this phenomenon annoys me but, this year, I'm not complaining. I enjoy Christmas carols playing in malls, and lighted displays on festively lighted lawns.

Even many Jewish families celebrate Christmas, at least the secular part of it. It's a secret their rabbis don't like to talk about, but it's true. Many Jewish families are overwhelmed by the cultural celebration of which they are a part. And rather than fight it, some of them have decided to join it.

A barber named Lou tells about an incident that happened shortly before Christmas in his shop. He was cutting the hair of a little boy while the boy's father waited. The boy was fascinated by the barbershop's Christmas tree, which was adorned with lights and decorations. He turned to his father and asked, "Daddy, why can't we have a Christmas tree in our house?"

The father very gently said, "Jewish houses don't have Christmas trees."

The little boy thought for a moment and then with a frown on his face replied, "Daddy, why did we have to buy a Jewish house?"

We can sympathize with our Jewish friends. The trappings of Christmas are everywhere. Much planning, much preparation goes into this sacred holiday. But, of course, trimming trees and writing cards and buying gifts is not the kind of preparation the prophet has in mind. The preparation he is writing about is much more profound. It is the preparation of the inner person. "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him..."

We need to prepare our hearts. We need to look within. The message of the prophet is one of repentance, of turning to God. It is a time of asking whether our hearts are really in tune with the heart of God.

Now please be careful as you examine your heart for God's presence. This is one time when "one size doesn't fit all." Your experience of God may not be the same as my experience. That doesn't mean that it is not just as real.

In one of his books, Maxie Dunnam tells about Washington Gladden, a famous pastor at the turn of the twentieth century. Gladden experienced real agony because he felt he could not find Christ. He had been taught, and thoroughly believed, that he needed to make his peace with God, accept Christ and be born again. He tried for years to gain the assurance of divine love. He listened intently in prayer meetings to the testimony of those who had found it; he attended every revival meeting which came along; he followed the suggestions which others prescribed. He tried to surrender himself a thousand times, but nothing seemed to happen. He never seemed to find or feel what others did. Many nights, from his little un-plastered room under the rafters of his father's farmhouse, he looked out at the stars with perplexity of spirit because he had not found Christ.

Then one day he met a minister who was sensitive, caring, and clear-headed. This minister told Gladden that if he would do his best to walk in the ways of loving service, he could trust God's love whether he had any ecstatic experiences about it or not. That was the word he needed. Washington Gladden began to walk where Jesus walked. He was led into a life of

notable ministry. He brought incisive application of the gospel to the social issues of the day, and helped shape the history of the church in America. It was Washington Gladden who wrote that great hymn:

*O Master, let me walk with thee /In lowly paths of service free;  
Tell me thy secret; help me bear /The strain of toil, the fret of care.  
Help me the slow of heart to move /By some clear, winning word of love;  
Teach me the wayward feet to stay, And guide them in the home-ward way. (ELW, 818)*

Washington Gladden had no sudden conversion experience. He found Jesus by seeking to walk daily in Christ's steps. But in walking in Christ's steps, his heart was prepared for Christ's coming.

Your experience of Christ may be different from mine. God speaks to us in terms of our own needs. Advent is a time for preparing our hearts. "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth...'"

Advent is also a time for renewing our hope. The coming of the Messiah was looked forward to by every Jew. When the Messiah came righteousness would be restored, peace would be universal, God's people would no longer be persecuted. It was a hope sustained by the Jews through long periods of captivity. Advent is meant to be a time of hope.

In many ways ours is a somewhat cynical and jaded society. We are suspicious of our fellow man and often look for the worse in other people and in circumstances. That is, until Christmas comes, and then something very interesting happens. We let down our guard just a little bit and we become willing to believe that, yes, things might just be better than we have imagined.

I read recently about a bike shop in a little town that was constantly busy, especially in the run-up to Christmas. One winter, a young boy wandered in, dirty-faced, poorly dressed and obviously not from a well-to-do family. Although at first the staff was worried about his shoplifting something, it soon became clear that the child was harmless enough. He would just come in, look closely one at a time at all the new bikes that were being brought in for the Christmas sales, and then stand out of the way in the corner of the room and watch the men work.

This went on for some time. He seemed to spend more and more time watching the repair part of the shop. And then, one day, after a large group of customers had just left, the young child made a beeline over to where some of the men were working. He laid a rusty old bolt on the counter in front of them. "Excuse me," he said politely, "would you be able to put a new bike on this bolt?"

The men laughed. Only a child would think of putting a bike on a bolt instead of a bolt on a bike.

The men's laughter, even though it was not intended to be mean, hurt the boy's feelings. He didn't understand, but he knew something he had said must have been wrong. He backed away and left the shop. The men ran outside after him. But the kid had disappeared.

A few weeks later, he was back. This time, however, if anything, he was even more reluctant to make eye contact with anyone at the store. He looked carefully at every new bike on display, as always, carefully scrutinizing each in turn. But this time he kept his head down whenever anyone else came near. Then he went to the repair area where he had given the men the bolt. His head was down, as if he were embarrassed, or had done something wrong, and he kept fingering the hole in his pants.

One of the men repairing bikes called to him: "Hey kid!" He looked up. "You forgot your bolt." And with that one of the staff wheeled out and presented the boy a bicycle. It was made entirely out of scrap parts that the store workers had salvaged on their own time.

A bike on a bolt! That could only happen at Christmas. There is something about this season of the year that opens our hearts and renews our hope. "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all humankind will see God's salvation.'"

Notice: "ALL humankind will see God's salvation." Advent is a time of affirming our unity with all humanity. The good news of Christmas is not just for those who look like us or speak the same language. God's salvation is for all people everywhere. We all know that, but sometimes it helps to be reminded.

Paul Stanley was an infantry company commander in Vietnam in 1967. He saw Viet Cong soldiers surrender many times. As they were placed in custody, marched away, and briefly interrogated, their body language and facial expressions always caught Stanley's attention. Most hung their heads in shame, staring at the ground, unwilling to look their captors in the eye. But some stood erect, staring defiantly at those around them, resisting any attempt by the soldiers to control them. They had surrendered physically but not mentally.

On one occasion after the enemy had withdrawn, Stanley came upon several soldiers surrounding a wounded Viet Cong. Shot through the lower leg, he was hostile and frightened, yet helpless. He threw mud and kicked with his one good leg when anyone came near him. When Stanley joined the circle around the wounded enemy, one soldier asked him, "Sir, what do we do? He's losing blood fast and needs medical attention." Stanley looked down at the struggling Viet Cong and saw the face of a 16- or 17-year-old boy. He unbuckled his pistol belt and hand grenades so the young captive could not grab them. Then, speaking gently, he moved toward him. The young man stared fearfully at Stanley as he knelt down, but he allowed him to slide his arms under him and pick him up. As he walked carrying this young Viet Cong warrior toward a waiting helicopter, the young man began to cry and hold him tight. He kept looking at Stanley and squeezing him tighter. They climbed into the helicopter and took off. During the ride, the young captive sat on the floor, clinging to Stanley's leg. Never having ridden in a helicopter, the young man looked out with panic as they gained altitude and flew over the trees.

The young man fixed his eyes back on Stanley, and Stanley smiled reassuringly and put his hand on his shoulder. After landing, Stanley picked him up and walked toward the medical tent. As they crossed the field, Stanley felt the tenseness leave the young man's body and his tight grasp loosen. His eyes softened, and his head leaned against Stanley's chest. The fear and resistance were gone--he had finally surrendered.

Wouldn't it be nice if every war story had that kind of ending? The Advent/Christmas story is an affirmation of our unity with all humanity. Ultimately every person on this planet is God's child. Every man is our brother; every woman is our sister.

Christmas is a foreshadowing of a world that is yet to come when Christ, the Messiah, reigns over all. It is a world of pure hearts, of undiminished hope and goodwill for all humanity. Amen.