

Prepare the Way

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Occasion: **Advent Two and CPSA World AIDS Day Service**

Luke 3:1-6

(20 minutes)

Theme: *"John calls us to prepare for Christ's return through repentance and proclamation"*

Introduction

Sometimes it feels to me that God has gone away. Perhaps he's asleep. Or travelling. Perhaps he's just got so fed up with us that he's abandoned us. When I look at the world around us, everything is just so messed up, that I wonder if God could possibly still be here. The way we pollute and rape our environment; the rolling conflicts in the Middle East and Africa; the arrogance of the world's superpowers; the corruption of some leader in South Africa; my personal struggle with sin in my own life. Where is God in all of this?

One of the great scourges of our contemporary society is HIV and AIDS. HIV is ravaging Southern Africa. A recent report said that around a thousand people die every day in South Africa from HIV- and AIDS-related illnesses. A thousand people! By the time we go to bed tonight, a thousand people will have died today. And tomorrow when we wake up we can know that a thousand people will die tomorrow. And the day after that. I often wonder how many thousands of people must die of AIDS before we wake up and put a stop to it.

There are many things that drive on the spread of HIV in our region. Poverty is a main driver of HIV. People who are poor don't have the same opportunities that we enjoy in our community. They don't believe they can actualise their dreams and aspirations like we can; so why bother to protect their lives? People in poor communities don't have access to health services like we do. They often don't have adequate nutrition, which allows HIV to spread even more aggressively.

In addition to poverty, gender is a main driver of HIV in Southern Africa. Women are uniquely vulnerable to HIV compared to men. Women are anatomically more vulnerable – the structure of the vagina, its mucous lining and the fact that it can hold infected semen for a long time – make women vulnerable to infection. But women don't have the same kind of decision-making power that men have – the choose who to have sex with and how. And women bear the brunt of poverty, with much less access to adequately paying jobs. So we say that women bear a triple burden of vulnerability – anatomical, social and economic. Today is the last of 16 Days of Activism Against Woman and Child Abuse – and we have been reminded that women continue, even in the 21st Century, to experience violence, rape and even murder in their own homes.

I work as an HIV researcher. And let me tell you that it is not going well in South Africa. We may not feel it here in our community, but out there the world is suffering. People are desperate. Desperate for something better; desperate for relief for release; desperate for healing; desperate for opportunities; desperate for hope; desperate for SALVATION!

John's Context

Our context is not entirely unlike the context into which John the Baptist was born. The Jewish people of his time weren't oppressed by HIV, but they were oppressed – by the Romans. They had been colonised by Rome for years, and before that by the Greeks and before that by the Babylonians and before that by the Egyptians. And they were tired of not being independent, not having decision-making power, not being free.

Not only was there oppression from outside, but even from within the Jewish community. Jewish religion had become politicised, with religious leaders using religious platforms to advance their political and self-seeking agendas. People were economically exploited – take Zacchaeus for example. He was a Jew who colluded with Rome to extort taxes from the people. Ironically, his name in Hebrew means righteous one. And women did not enjoy much status and equality Jewish society. Just think of the woman caught in adultery who was used by the religious leaders as a pawn in an attempt to discredit Jesus – and dehumanised and humiliated in the process.

And so Jewish society at that time was desperate. Desperate for something better; desperate for relief for release; desperate for consolation; desperate for freedom; desperate for hope; desperate for SALVATION!

John's Call

And it is into this context that the Word of God came to John in the desert. What is so remarkable about this is that there had been no prophets for generations. It was as if God was silent – perhaps God had abandoned the people of Israel, must like we wonder if He's abandoned us today. John is called by God like the prophets of old were called, like Elijah. And so the people were terribly excited – God was speaking again, through this man John! And people rushed to hear what John had to say.

And what did John say? He proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This idea of repentance is fabulously visual. It is a complete turning of the self [I acted this out] – away from sin and towards God. It involves reorientating ourselves towards God, forsaking sin. And God forgives us – so we are cleansed – and this is what the baptism is about – a cleansing, a fresh start, made right in our relationship with God, made righteous in his eyes.

A few verses later John calls the people who have experienced the baptism of repentance to demonstrate the fruit of repentance. He wasn't satisfied with people feeling right with God; they needed to show this rightness in their actions, in how they lived. And in the next verses Luke gives three examples of how John applied this to the specific lives of the people who came to him:

- To those who had more, he said they must give away some of what they had. If they had two coats, they should give one away. It was a call to generosity and compassion.
- To the tax collectors who came to ask what they should do – and tax collectors were not much like back then, nor now – he told them to collect only what they were entitled to collect. It was a call to be fair and just.
- To the soldiers who came to ask what *they* should do, John said they must be content with their salaries and not bully people to get more that they were entitled to. It was a call to contentment and respect.

John's Promise

Now John said all of these things because this was how the Jewish people needed to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. The repentance was in preparation for Jesus to come. And we meet Jesus just a few verses later – as he is baptised and then tempted in the desert. And when Jesus returns from the desert the first thing he does is to go to the local synagogue and teach. And he reads this magnificent passage from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." Now remember to whom he was speaking – Jesus was speaking to a people who felt oppressed, who felt in bondage, who felt that God was silent. Listen to what he says to them. "He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And then he sits down and says, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus is saying that the release that they've been longing for is found in him – "I am your release," says Jesus. "You want to see clearly? I am your sight. You want hope? I am your hope. You

want salvation? I am salvation!" Jesus is the embodiment of the salvation that the people of Israel have been longing for.

Isn't this wonderful?! How God has made a promise to the people of Israel and has now brought it to fruition in the person of Jesus.

All of this is a fulfilment of a prophecy that was made by Isaiah centuries before to the people of Israel when they were in exile in Babylon and desperate for release. Isaiah said, "Prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight paths for him." And this is what John was doing. In calling people to repentance, in preaching that they must make right with God, John was helping to prepare the Jewish people for the coming Messiah. The 'preparation' is to clear a road of any obstacle that could hinder the advance of the Messiah. The 'straight paths' is a metaphor for right lives – the idea of a life that is straight, true, right.

And the promise is that when we prepare for the coming of the Lord, then all humanity will see God's salvation, God's glory, God's son!

Application

The Jewish people in John's time were not unlike ourselves today. We are both yearning for the coming Messiah – they for his first coming, we for his return. The difference is that they expected him to come soon, whereas we seem to expect him to return later. Maybe only in future generations. We talk sometimes like Jesus' return is just a nice story to give us hope.

But the reality is that Jesus could come anytime. Jesus could knock on the door of St Martins this very morning, and walk in and say, "I'm back. Are you ready?" I'm serious. He could arrive today, or tomorrow or next week – we need to prepare for his immanent return. So John's message of two thousand years ago is relevant for us. He called the Jewish people to prepare for Jesus' coming, and he calls us to prepare for Jesus' return. Are you prepared?

I think if John were here today, he'd call us to do two things in preparation for Jesus: repentance and proclamation.

- John's basic message was one of repentance, of making our hearts right with God, of preparing ourselves to receive Jesus. We need to turn away from our sinfulness and align ourselves to God. We ought to be different from the rest of the world – but all too often we just blend in and look no different from anyone else. We are called to be compassionate, generous, fair, just and content. We need to make ourselves right to receive Jesus when he returns this afternoon.
- And John would also call us to proclaim the good news of salvation. We have the promise of hope that the world desperately needs right now. We cannot keep it to ourselves; we need to share it. We need to help prepare everyone for Jesus' return, not only ourselves. In particular, we need to reflect on how we can proclaim the good news in the contexts of HIV, poverty and gender discrimination. In relation to HIV we can make a stand for values and morals in a world that seems to be losing all sense of standards. In relation to poverty, we can pay our employees, our domestic workers, a living wage rather than merely the minimum wage. In relation to gender discrimination, we can put our foot down to all forms of violence against women.

And the promise is this, that as we do these things – as we repent and make our personal lives right with God, and as we proclaim the return of the Messiah and the good news of salvation – we help to prepare the way for Jesus' return. We clear the paths so that he can advance, unimpeded, into our world.

And so during this Advent season, we pray out the deepest yearning of our hearts – Come Lord Jesus, come! Maranatha!