

SERMON 4TH DECEMBER 2022

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When you walk into a doctor's surgery for the first time you are given a clip board with lots of questions to fill in. Let's pretend that this is your first time to church and you have been given a similar clip board to fill in.

- * Who was the person who introduced you to Jesus Christ?
- * Who was it that prepared the way for you to know and grow in Christ?
- * Who made your path straight? or we might say, put us on the right track.
- * Who filled in the valleys and lowered those huge mountains, so that we could see God better?
- * Who was it that straightened out our crooked roads for us and made our rough places smooth?
- * Who led you along paths that had been lovingly smoothed so you could know Jesus or find Jesus in a new way.
- * Last question: how did you hear about us? I wonder how many might say on Franklin Graham's twitter page?

It may be our parents,

or ordinary, kind, compassionate people,

the kind of people you all are sitting here today.

That says to me

that the people who are most often given the responsibility

for preparing the way of God are people like us.

Most of us might say, "Gosh, no! Not me."

"I don't know the bible that well, or I can't preach."

But the fact is that most of Christ's work is done by us
and people just like us.

A writer called Georgia Harkness once said,

"The most potent evangelism

is that which takes place through the work of the local church."

and she's not talking about a building,

she's talking about us, the people,

because the church is the people of God.

The people who come here on Sunday,

the people who provide hospitality,

the people who provide music,

who read, clean and care for our worship space.

The people who serve and administer the communion,

the people who intercede and sing,

You people are the people of God,

you prepare the way of the Lord.

God called John the Baptist

to prepare the way of the Lord in the 1st century.

He calls us to prepare the way of the Lord in this century.

And we do that every week as we worship together,

as we invite our friends, relatives and co-workers to worship with us,

as we eat together and sing together,

as we praise God together,

As we do all these things,

we prepare the way of the Christ.

We don't need to be rich or famous,

we just need to be servants of God to prepare the way.

Life is tough, and even though many of us live what might be called privileged lives, we still have to go through tough patches--those times when we are sure our lives as we know them are over for all intents and purposes. Sometimes there are terrible blows--the loss of a spouse or a child, the ending of an important relationship, a deep betrayal, a loved one's diagnosis of...you name it...cancer, Alzheimer's. Eventually we make it through, unless we are the ones whose lives are threatened with a terminal illness or injury. But for a time, life seems impossible: The joy is gone, the relationship is gone, the loved one is gone, the way of life is gone, the sense of purpose is gone. Sometimes all at once. I know that many of you have gone through that kind of anguish. I also know that there are many sorrows and burdens that I will never know even from some of you, sorrows you have borne in silence, hidden in hearts.

Each time we are given bad news our hope even though diminished somewhat still finds a way of staying alive in the midst of bad news after bad news. Somehow we will find a way through all this. This season of Advent is the Season of hope, Emmanuel God with us is hope coming alive again in our lives and in our world.

Matthew writes this chapter in the midst of a world of hoping, the time of great need and expectation. John the Baptist is such an unusual character that we modern readers find him hardly believable. He is a rugged, ascetic

nonconformist, whose diet consists of locusts and wild honey, and who carries on his crusades outside the cities in the wilderness. But he plays a critical role in the Gospel narrative. He is identified, in the words of Isaiah, as the voice calling for the preparation of the way of Jesus. He preaches a message of repentance linked to the confession of sins and practices baptism as a sign of repentance. Crowds from Jerusalem and the surrounding districts flock to hear John and apparently find in his preaching a message worth hearing.

‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand’. Heaven’s kingdom was Matthew’s favoured way of speaking of God’s reign. This is the focus of hope when God would change the world, liberate them from their oppressors, set them free. ‘How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who announce good news, who declare to Zion, "Your God reigns".’ That is the hope we find in Isaiah 52:7. God will reign. Things will change!

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of its roots.

The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon the One [who is to come]...

...the spirit of wisdom and understanding...

...the wolf shall live with the lamb...

...the lion shall eat straw like the ox...

...and a little child shall lead them...

They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain;

For the earth will be filled of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.

These words from Isaiah were not spoken in a day dream watching an amazing sunset. He was watching the swords of the great and overpowering Assyrian army as they sliced their way through his native land of Palestine, leaving

nothing but a trail of blood and agony. He was living through what has been called the first holocaust of the Jews. It occurred between 740 and 700 B.C.D. Five times during these 40 years the Assyrian army stampeded its way through the hill country of Israel working terror and destruction wherever it went.

With no regard for anyone's culture, with no regard for anyone's religion, with no regard for anyone else's life, they came like a scorpion plague, devouring everything and everyone in their path. Over and over and over, the people of Isaiah's Judah had been ravaged. The horrid sounds of war were ever familiar. The cries of pain seldom ceased. Who could plant a field and have any hope that it would survive to the harvest? Who could bear a child with a confidence that it would reach maturity? It was a horrible forty years, those years in which Isaiah lived.

But the prophet spoke. "Even though the world has become a living nightmare," he was saying, "even though there is no sign anywhere that peace will ever come, even though human greed and destructiveness are running rampant across our world, hear this: THE PROMISE OF GOD IS MORE POWERFUL THAN THE DESTRUCTIVENESS OF HUMANITY! The wolf *shall* dwell with the lamb; the leopard *shall* lie down with the kid.

So where have you found hope in the midst of your own tragedy? Every now and then I see a little shoot of life bursting forth from a dead stump. What seemed like the end of everything worth living for is being transformed before our eyes, in little tiny ways that sometimes we don't even see it happening. Often we don't notice--and though still hurting—we begin to take a step forward towards healing.

How are our lives being lived out through these Advent days. For some it might be darkness and of unexpected light, days of endings and of unexpected beginnings, days of death and unexpected life. And the signs of all of these are not much...a shoot out of a stump, a branch out of the roots, a step forward, a smile...not much, but they are enough. For every now and then, peace breaks out in a place where we never would have believed possible. Every once in a while, the deepest, oldest wound begins to heal. Every now and then, a hatchet gets buried that is never dug up again.

What is it that makes us weep when we hear Isaiah's incredible images for God's purposeful future? We may try to hold ourselves together keeping a stiff upper lip and carrying on. We dare not show any vulnerability. But Isaiah's words cut through all our false bravado and reveal us for what we are at our core--God's tired and weary children who long to be gathered up and loved and told that we are safe and that, despite the pain and the loss and the anguish of this world, there is something better coming *for* us, something better coming *from* us, if we will only keep hoping. A shoot from a dead stump. A smile from a long frozen face. A step into a church after years of hurt. A little baby crying in a manger.

It's not much, is it? But it's enough for me. And I hope and pray it will be enough for you.

During this Advent Season, lets receive Christ again into our lives,
let's make Christ the centre of our lives again. Amen.