

## **Preparing for the Prince of Peace**

Matthew 3:1-6

Craig M. Watts

Back when I was in college, I remember hearing students complain, “I’ve spent my whole life preparing. I sometimes wonder when I’ll ever be able to get around to living.” Most of us have probably had similar feelings at one time or another. We want to skip the preliminaries and get right down to the main event. As children we wanted to go play the piano or the saxophone or the guitar without having to endure the tedious experience of practicing the instrument. As adults, we would like to advance by leaps and bounds in our chosen profession without having to go through any prolonged training. But so often when we lack preparation, we find ourselves frustrated and unequipped when new chapters of life open to us.

We cannot anticipate all that will eventually come our way, but life is certainly easier when the future doesn’t entirely catch us off guard. You see, the kind of preparation that we need depends upon the sort of future we anticipate. Sure, it might rain on the day we planned a picnic, but we don’t normally plan our picnics on days we believe will be filled with rain. The forecast influences what we intend to do. Likewise, the way we invest our money depends upon whether we anticipate a bear market or a bull market. The future that we envision shapes what we do and the sort of people we become.

It is extremely difficult to get serious about preparing for anything if we don’t have a lively sense that something new is on the horizon. Catholic missionary, Vincent Donovan, worked with the Masai people in East Africa for 17 years. He expressed the opinion that people like the Masai would not likely ever take a broad and active role in human development. He noted that this group assumes that tomorrow will be pretty much like today. So they feel no special need for preparation. They are without an expectant hope for the future. Indeed, there is no future tense in the Masai language. There are people in our own culture whose approach to life lacks a vital future tense, even though our language contains one.

Of course, this problem is not new. The prophet Malachi lived in a time that was uneventful. The social and political turmoil that characterized the days of many of the prophets was not experienced by Malachi and his contemporaries. His time seemed like a period of waiting. It was as though God had gone to some far corner of the universe and left the people to themselves. Oh sure, religious life continued. Rituals were performed. Holy days were observed. The priests went through the motions but the passion was missing. Generations had come and gone without seeing the ancient promises of God fulfilled. Little by little, the faith of

the people seemed to erode. So Malachi went to proclaim to the people that the Lord would indeed come and a messenger would appear before him to prepare the way. That Day of the Lord would hold reason for both hope and dread. Malachi wanted to awaken the people from their spiritual slumber so that they would be prepared.

The message of preparation echoed again centuries later when that strange character from the wilderness, John the Baptist, began preaching. At the time of John gentile converts to Judaism normally submitted to a ceremonial washing, a baptism of sorts, in order to be admitted into the Jewish fold. Natural born Jews need not participate in such a ritual. Their membership in the chosen nation was hereditary. From infancy on they were numbered with God's people. They needed no special initiation or preparation. Or so they thought. Clearly, John the Baptist thought otherwise. God called him to proclaim a message of repentance. It was his job to baptize the people who were willing to make a U-turn in their lives. Those who rested content in the knowledge that Abraham was their father were going to be in for a brutal surprise, according to John. God wanted a lot more than a people with a pedigree. God wanted a people who would be prepared to greet the saving activity of God.

Well, what kind of preparation could be needed? After all, God wasn't likely to expect a whole lot of change from good upright folks who were already a part of the chosen nation, was God? Surely, just a little cleaning up here and there would do the trick, some minor moral renovation would probably be sufficient. No doubt all that would be necessary would be to change a few bad habits, drop some unedifying words from their vocabulary, be a bit more friendly to neighbors and perhaps go to church a little more often. No big deal. Really, it's not as though John were talking to a bunch of murderers, thieves or rapists. He was preaching to nice respectable religious people, a lot...well, a lot like us.

So when John the Baptist proclaimed "Prepare the way of the Lord," we might assume that he meant that the people should sweep the dust from the walkway of their lives. But evidently John had bigger things in mind – a lot bigger. The images he used are downright distressing: "Every valley shall be filled, every mountain and hill shall be brought low and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways shall be made smooth." Now that is certainly imagery overkill if John is interested in no more than minor renovations. It sounds more like major highway construction, blasting through mountains, leveling the high spots, moving countless tons of earth to fill in the low-lying terrain and the grating down of rocky and uneven surfaces. This sort of preparation is no miniscule make-over. It is a monumental enterprise.

Well, what sorts of things did John have in mind? He spells out what is involved in preparing the way of the Lord in the verses that follow our Gospel text. John told his listeners to

share their property with the needy, refuse to use their privileged position and power to take advantage of weaker, more vulnerable members of society, renounce violence and learn to be content. Doing these things was no easy task. After all, here was no shortage of poor in need of help; it could be pretty expensive. And it seemed rather silly not to maximize one's advantage over the ne'er-do-wells of the world. Why not keep paying them minimum wage or charging them all they can afford if we've got them over a barrel? And why quit using violence if it works? After all, this is a violent world and we've got to be realistic, don't we?

John the Baptist must have heard these protests and more. But John heard something beyond the clamoring voices of his world, and he saw more than that which is contained in the horizons of the world. He saw a future. He saw God's future. He saw the coming of the Prince of Peace and the in-breaking of the new age. John told the people that they needed their lives shaped, not primarily by the so-called realities of today, but by the promise of a new age under the reign of the Prince of Peace. And with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the new age began to unfold.

But all has not been accomplished. There is more to come. And so we too need to be prepared. The fact is that we prepare only for those things we genuinely hope and believe will take place. Our preparation is an expression of our confidence in a promise of some sort. Living by our fantasies is something different. In fantasy, we entertain possibilities that don't necessarily have a future. Fantasy retreats from reality. Fantasy is the product of imagination. But hope is the fruit of promise. True hope points to a coming reality.

In the old Hitchcock film "Rear Window," there was a woman who each week would carefully prepare a fine meal, set a table for two, complete with candles, put on a lovely dress and set down across from the empty chair. She would lift her wine glass and smile at the man that could be seen only by her mind's eye. She was not insane. She was fantasizing. She prepared herself each week but no one knocked at her door or sat at her table. She didn't expect anyone. She prepared but there was no promise. She had been given no pledge of a new future.

But as Christians, we have been given such a pledge. We have been called upon to live in light of that future and to prepare for it in the here and now. That future is one of peace. It is one in which there is neither want nor self-indulgence, but contentment and joy. How can we prepare for such a future in a world of warring conflict and greedy grasping? Certainly not by adapting the violent and self-serving ways of this world. Insuring our prosperity by "looking out for number one" and preserving peace by preparing for war does not seem to be the approach to readiness that John the Baptist or Jesus or the apostles had in mind. All of them called upon the people of God to live a life that anticipated the future in a world of the present. This is hard

work. It is likely to make us out of step with our peers. It is likely to leave us fairly vulnerable. But, then, so was Jesus and we have been called to follow him. If we are going to be prepared for the future God is bringing, we ought not to wait until after the Prince of Peace has returned to be self-sacrificially compassionate and peaceable. Preparation begins today.

Lives that are lived in light of the future may look a bit odd in the present, somewhat out of place, perhaps even comical. But our apparent foolishness can be a beautiful witness to a dying world. There is a story that came out of the Czech underground after the Russian takeover. To celebrate their victory, the Communist party scheduled a large parade with row after row of hulking tanks, mobile missiles, and battalions of trained soldiers. Unexpectedly in the middle of this demonstration of power a little blue pick-up truck darted in and began weaving about disrupting the parade with a six-foot sign which said, "For God's sake, why?" (I picked up this story from David Buttrick.)

If the church will embody the future of God in its life and in the lives of its members, we will put that question, "Why?" to the world. "Why?" to the wealth and the poverty? "Why?" to power that does not work for the common good. "Why?" to violence and hatred. We can ask that "why" because we have been promised something better than the pretensions of the present. The Prince of Peace is coming, and he's bringing a new age. Let us prepare by living loving, generous and peaceable lives and thereby prepare the way of the Lord.