



Preparing the Way for Joy

Scripture Reading: Luke 3:1-6

I'm no tech genius (in case you were wondering). Nor am I an early adopter when it comes to such things. Some who read this may never have signed up for cable TV. Others likely "cut the cord" long ago. As for me, I'm experimenting with such things now.

My first step in cutting the cord was to purchase an indoor antenna that is supposed to pick up a plethora of local stations with crystal clear reception. We'll see. The directions in the box tell me I may need to move the antenna a few times to get the best reception. Hopefully, I won't find myself back in my yesteryear experiences of twisting and turning the old rabbit ears, collapsible metal poles, and even an old hangar as I try to get through the static.

Reception. It's the key. Whatever it takes, whether via an antenna, the internet, and/or cable, if I want my television to come alive to its purpose, I must prepare the way for it to receive the input it needs when I turn it on. If I don't prepare the way, no amount of pounding, yelling, hard work, or good intentions will make a difference.

This is the principle behind next Sunday's Gospel reading from Luke 3. John the Baptist, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy, "went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins ... crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!'" The one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire is coming.

Reception. It's the key. Jesus is coming, and we must be prepared to receive him. This isn't simply a message for those awaiting Jesus' arrival in the time of Emperor Tiberius and Pontius Pilate. It is a call for all people at all times, one we especially emphasize and practice responding to in the season of Advent.

What might happen if you were a little more intentional about preparing the way for the Lord this Advent? Looking toward Sunday, why not try memorizing and meditating on the suggested verse of the week. Looking toward Christmas, why not practice sitting still with God away from distractions for five minutes or more each day (I've found twenty minutes to be a challenging and helpful amount of time). You might try slowly breathing in and out, praying, "Come, Jesus, come" or "Come, Holy Spirit, come." Other ideas for preparing the way will be listed below in the *Something(s) to Try* section. Sunday's sermon will provide still more.

Our sermon series this month at Salem is titled, *(Re)Discovering the Joy of Christmas!* And certainly, one of the keys to discovering or rediscovering the joy God offers is reception. We can't just make joy happen. We can't force it. But we can do certain things that can significantly prepare the way for us to experience joy on a consistent basis.

Reception is the key; making sure the pathways for God's life-giving, joy-giving presence, word, and Spirit are open and clear. Jesus and John the Baptist used the word "repent" to call people to tune back in to God, to get the pathways straight between them and God. The word means "to turn around," body, mind, and heart. It may take some twisting and turning, some time and energy, but this Advent is a great time to position and reposition yourself before God, to practice getting yourself into a receptive position before God. The joy of God's pleasure and love will flow to and through you as you do. Enjoy!

Prayer:

God of joy, I turn and open my heart to you. Come and fill me with your presence. Give me ears to hear your word. Give me eyes to see your light shining for me, in me, and through me. Strengthen my faith so that even when I do not feel particularly joyful, I may trust you, anyway and always, giving thanks to you in all circumstances and rejoicing in your love through it all. I ask this in the name of Jesus with thanks that you hear my prayers. Amen.

Suggested Verse for Meditation or Memorization:

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Something(s) to Try:

- Memorize the suggested verses of the week and take time to meditate by prayerfully reflecting on them. Try emphasizing a different word each time you read or recite the verses, taking note of how emphasizing each particular word directs your thinking.
- Practice sitting still with God away from distractions for five minutes or more each day (I've found twenty minutes to be a challenging and helpful amount of time). Try slowly breathing in and out, praying, "Come, Jesus, come" or "Come, Holy Spirit, come."
- As we suggested last week when you pray about things that trouble you, raise up your head, take a deep breath, and look toward heaven, giving thanks for God's faithfulness, that he sees you and hears you as you pray. Pray boldly (Hebrews 4:16), with joyful confidence and thanksgiving (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).
- As you head into challenging situations today/this week, stand still and raise up your head for a moment before entering in (before walking into the room or speaking), look to God and take a deep breath praying for the Holy Spirit to enter in and give you strength, wisdom, and faith.

Further Suggested Readings:

- Psalm 126
- Malachi 3:1-4
- Luke 1:68-79
- Philippians 1:3-11