

“Preparing the Way”

Isaiah 40:1-5; Matthew 3:1-12

Prepare the way for the Lord!!



I hated diagramming sentences. Do students still do that? I can remember the endlessly twisted lines of nouns and verbs, clauses and sub-clauses. Ugh...but I wish I had paid more attention to it. Grammar matters. Vocabulary and grammar are the basic tools of communication. Grammar is how we say exactly what we mean.

Take verb tenses for example. Various, Paul writes that we “have been saved” (Eph. 2:8), “we are being saved” (1 Cor. 1:18), and “we shall be saved” (Rom. 5:9). So which is it? Is Paul just being sloppy with his grammar or even his thinking?

Few would so bold as to refer to Paul as “sloppy” about anything. He was an intellectual powerhouse, and his writings collected for us in the New Testament are God-breathed Scripture. He meant exactly what he said. So, as faithful readers of God’s Word we pay attention to the grammar, including the verb tenses. Every bit of it matters very much.

A moment of past, present, and future

Last week, we heard the prophets speak a word of anticipation, looking ahead to the glorious day when God would settle all accounts and put all things right, when all the nations would come streaming to God and live in peace. It is as if they were saying “God will act!” – the future tense. The arrival of God’s Messiah will change the world. The Christian proclamation is that this Day of the Lord arrived in Jesus, beginning with his birth and God’s profound and humbling incarnation.

This week we come to the present tense. The bursting upon the scene of a man named John, who preached a message of preparation and repentance and enacted this turning around by washing people in the Jordan River, i.e., baptizing them.

John is the prophet who announces that the Day of the Lord is fast upon God’s people, and they must ready themselves for it. Centuries before another prophet had cried out: “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” And now John cries out that the time has come. The moment has arrived.

It is difficult for us to grasp just how volatile and violent was the world across which John’s words

Israel and Rome

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drifted. The accompanying textbox may help you see the danger that, at best, lay just beneath the surface. Too often, it came bursting forth spilling blood even within the sacred walls of Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

But John stood out there in the Jordan, the boundary between civilization and the wilderness. He dressed the part: animal skins, living off locusts and honey. Some even mistook him for Elijah, longing for God to do God's big thing.

Thus, John the baptizer, laying his eyes on Jesus pronounces that he, this modest man from Galilee, is the One, the long-awaited Lamb of God who will reconcile the world to God (John 1:29).

In essence, John was saying wake up, dress in your best clothes, the big day has come. But John's message was one not only of immediacy but of anticipation. For he pronounced that Jesus would baptize not with water, not for mere repentance, but with the Holy Spirit, for rebirth. And this Spirit of God, whom the people of God would come to understand as the third person of the Trinitarian God, would be God present with his people, as God had once been, long before.

The Spirit of Christ is, in the wonderful words of Gordon Fee, "the evidence of the presence of the future." Not only was the arrival of the Christ a fulfillment of God's promises made to Abraham, but Jesus was also the present-future, the one through whom God's wondrous future came rushing to meet the present day.

Preparation

In God's kingdom, the brokenhearted are healed, captives are set free, those who mourn are comforted – all this is truly Good News to the oppressed. In God's kingdom, swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4:5). The blind see, the deaf hear, and the mute speak (Isaiah 35:5-7). The prophets of the Old Testament spoke long and clearly about the coming of God's kingdom. In his teachings and actions, Jesus taught and showed people what God's kingdom is really like. He healed the sick, he made the blind see – all that is wrong with this world will be healed. Jesus hung around with the outcasts of Jewish society to demonstrate that everyone is welcome in the people of God. He showed people that God's kingdom is not just a promised future but also a present reality.

In Advent, we celebrate the coming of Jesus, the anointed of God. John and Jesus both proclaimed that a new day was dawning. Jesus showed the Jews a new way of being the people of God so that they might truly be the light to the world. We have the same responsibility to be God's light, to do all we can to build a world in which God's will is done, to bring about the marriage of heaven and earth that we pray for each week. But in seeking after this divine marriage, we are not on our own. The Holy Spirit, the empowering presence of God, is our "comforter" and "advocate" (John 14:26 & 15:26). The new day is a day of comfort and peace and joy. It is a little ironic that the stress of the holiday season can make it so hard for us to embrace the peace of God's kingdom. We ought to catch our collective breath and see the reality of God's kingdom in the look of unbridled joy on children's faces, in our efforts and gifts that help and serve others, in the personal relationships that we cherish, and in all the goodness of this life. Yes, Christmas carries the light of the world!

A few keys for reading Matthew

Because of this book's "Jewishness," when you are reading Matthew, always bear in mind Israel's story – the creation, the fall, the calling out of Abraham and the promise of a great nation through whom the world would be blessed, the deliverance from Egypt, Moses and the Law, the idealized King David, and the continual inability of Israel to live up to her end of the covenant with God. Matthew proclaims that Israel's story reached its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Likely, Matthew had the gospel of Mark available to him when writing his own account of Jesus. Using Mark's action-oriented narrative as the basic structure for his own gospel, Matthew added a beginning (the genealogy and birth story), an ending (the resurrection account), and inserted five blocks of Jesus' teachings. By inserting so much of Jesus' teaching, Matthew emphasizes Jesus' authority as a teacher and the training of his new community in what it means to live in the kingdom of God. Thus, Jesus not only teaches his disciples how they are to live in relationship with one another, but even how the community is to discipline itself. Matthew's focus on Jesus' authority is borne out in the great commission (Matt 28:16-20). Here, Jesus instructs his own disciples to go and make "make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything I commanded you." Despite Matthew's attention to Jesus' authority and teachings, too often, when reading the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7), we tend to see Jesus' teachings as presenting us with an impossible-to-achieve ideal. This is simply too easy a way out. Just as Moses' instructed Israel on how they were to live in covenant with God, Jesus teaches his disciples how they (we!) are to live as the renewed people of God. The Sermon on the Mount is profoundly counter-cultural. All the "real world" notions of power and success are turned on their head. Jesus speaks directly to our character, our influence, our righteousness, our devotion, our ambitions, our relationships, and our commitment to Jesus' authority. Jesus instructs his disciples not merely as a wise teacher, but as the Lord of all creation!!