

Crying in the Wilderness

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday of Advent, December 8, 1991 at Oxford High School. Scripture Lessons: Luke 3:1-6

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

John the Baptist was a voice crying in the wilderness. He was the last Old Testament prophet. John wasn't big on hugs and kisses. He wasn't big on sentimentalism. Any Hollywood picture about John the Baptist that's faithful to the Biblical witness would have to be filmed in black and white, not in color. The wilderness is a place of harsh contrasts. And everything was pretty much black and white for John without any shades of gray. John didn't care much whether you liked him or hated him. He wasn't much into winning friends and influencing people. And he wasn't very sympathetic with the excuses people make to justify their sins.

John was the messenger of the covenant. He prepared the way for Jesus. Without John the Baptist and the Old Testament prophets our religion would be a much different religion. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, apart from the Law of God is cheap grace. A person will not and cannot repent unless they first see that they're sinners. Yet, paradoxically, a person will never really be able to repent, unless they first know something of the grace of God that's offered to us through Jesus Christ.

My preparation for this sermon was interrupted on Thursday evening by my mother's death. I would've prepared a much different sermon had she not died. But in the wake of her death I've spent a lot of time thinking about her

and especially how she prepared the way of the Lord for me.

Like John the Baptist, my mother detested anything that smacked of sophistication. When I was a child she wore no make-up except for a little bit of lipstick and a touch of cheap perfume that my dad would give her for Christmas and which would last until the next Christmas. When I was a child she wasn't into fashionable clothing. She referred to those who wore fashionable clothes and ate fancy food as hoity-toity, high-faluting people who like to put on airs.

She was in some ways like John the Baptist preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Just as John the Baptist prepared the way of the Lord for the Jews of his day, my mother prepared the way of the Lord for me.

She prepared the way of the Lord for me in many different ways. For example, every night when I was a little boy, she'd tucked me in, sit down on the edge of the bed and take the Bible from the stand beside the bed. She'd read to me short passages every night and over the space of years we slowly made our way from the Garden of Eden in Genesis to the City of God in Revelation.

She prepared the way of the Lord for me by teaching me to pray. Besides bed time prayers there was prayer before every meal. It didn't make any difference whether we were in the privacy of our kitchen or in a crowded restaurant. We prayed before meals. Once a year at Christmas

we'd go up to Philadelphia on the train to see the Christmas displays and we'd always eat at Horn and Hardart's. I'd be so embarrassed when she'd make me bow my head and close my eyes while she prayed out loud with all those people around. She was preparing the way of the Lord, instructing me that Christianity isn't just a private, but a public faith.

She was intent on making straight everything that was crooked in me. She wasn't much into situational ethics. There was right and there was wrong. There was the crooked and there was a straight. There was the rough and there was the smooth. There was good and there was evil and there wasn't much, if anything in-between. From her I learned that God's law is good and that "sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God". Knowing something of God's law through her, I knew from a very early age that I needed a Savior from sin. I could not be saved by my own efforts. Only Christ could save me.

"Remember the Sabbath." My mother prepared the way of the Lord for me by going with me to Sunday School and Church. Like most kids I had no desire whatsoever to go to either. But there was no escape. Every once in a while I'd fake being sick and get out of going but that was a card I dare not play very often.

I got very little out of church. I didn't understand or pay attention to what the preacher said. Nevertheless I was learning hymns. I was learning a Christian vocabulary. I was hearing words like sin, grace, repentance,

justification, sanctification, salvation. While I restlessly twisted and turned and doodled with my piece of paper and pencil throughout the worship service the way of the Lord was being prepared.

"Thou shalt not commit adultery." Sex was not something I ever talked about with my mother except once, when I was about 7 years old. It was night and we were in the kitchen. My mother was washing the dishes and I asked her how babies were born. She didn't have the slightest idea. And yet, somehow, my mother prepared the way of the Lord for me by instilling in me that sex outside of marriage is not only unwise, dangerous, and unhealthy, but most important of all, it's sin. It was very difficult to sin when I was a teenager on a date because even though my mother was back home, she was also with me, watching me. And I knew that when I got home she'd be there to ask me, "Well what did you do?"

"Thou shalt not steal." Once we were shopping at Sears in Wilmington. I put a nickel into a candy machine for a candy bar. I got not only the candy bar but my nickel back. That inspired me to pull down the money release lever. Out clattered a bunch of nickels. Wanting to milk this good fortune for all it was worth I began pulling all the levers and was rewarded with all kinds of candy bars. I hit the jack-pot. But it was all for nought. My mother made me take all the money and candy to the cashier because it wasn't mine. The cashier foolishly advised my mother that the candy machine had ripped off so many others that justice would be served by

letting me have both the money and candy. My hopes revived. My mother would hear nothing of it though.. "It's not your money or candy any more than it's my son's." It sounded crooked to my mother and she wanted me to be straight.

My mother was certainly not perfect. My brother and sisters, in fact, are well aware of her imperfections and, as an adult, I was not always slow to point them out to her. Nevertheless, more than anyone else, she prepared the way of the Lord for me. She prepared me to place my own faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Oddly enough, I never remember her speaking to me about her own personal faith in Christ. We never had religious conversations. She never talked about God to me although I have memories of seeing her talk to God in prayer. Nevertheless, she prepared the way of the Lord for me.

I'm not necessarily commending my mothers child-raising techniques any more than I can commend the strange ways of John the Baptist. Nevertheless, she, like John the Baptist, prepared the way of the Lord for me.

You and I are either preparing the way of the Lord for someone or we're putting obstacles in their way. As parents it's our duty to prepare the way of the Lord for our children. And we're either preparing the way of the Lord for our neighbors and fellow workers or we're placing obstacles in their way. What we say and do either makes it easier for people to get to

Jesus or more difficult. John the Baptist calls us to get rid of everything in our lives that keeps others from getting through to Christ.

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his path straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

My mother prepared the way of the Lord for me. Through her I came to believe that God's love isn't a sentimental, gushy, syrupy love. It's a tough love, the love of a Holy God who hates sins and will go to any length to root it out of our lives so that others will see in us and through us the salvation of God.

Let us pray: Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation; Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.