

Preparing the Way

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd of a four-part series

December 10, 2023

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Isaiah 40:1–5, 11 (NRSV)

Comfort, O comfort my people,

says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Matthew 3:1–12 (NRSV)

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.'"

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Prepare the way for the Lord!!

I hated diagramming sentences. Do students even still do that? I can remember the endlessly twisted vines of nouns and verbs, clauses and sub-clauses. Uggh. . . . 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

Israel and Rome

With the help of Herod the Great, Rome had secured its control of Palestine about 30 years before Jesus birth. Though Herod was allowed to sit on a puppet throne, Rome wielded its power through governors and procurators such as Pontius Pilate. In Jesus’ day, Rome controlled a vast empire spanning the Mediterranean and reaching up into Britain.

Rome wanted two things from its governors. They had to keep the peace and collect the taxes. There was constant strife between the Jews of Palestine and their Roman lords. Rome wasn’t troubled by the Jews’ peculiar belief in one God (who had chosen the Jews, no less!). Instead, Rome was constantly confronted by Jewish efforts to throw off Roman rule and establish God’s kingdom on earth. Indeed, Galilee was a hotbed of this revolutionary activity. In about 4BC, Judas ben Hezekiah led a Jewish revolt which the Romans ended by crucifying thousands of Jews! In 6AD, Judas the Galilean gathered some followers, declared himself the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, and sought, through force, to overthrow Roman rule. Of course, it was a doomed-from-the-start effort, and Judas ended up dead at the hands of the Roman executioners just like every other would-be Messiah – and there were more than a few! The Roman governors were heavy-handed in their rule of Palestine and often provoked incidents with their ignorant and greedy actions. For example, early in his procuratorship, Pontius Pilate used money from the Jewish Temple treasury to build an aqueduct and then had to crush the resistance to his theft from the Jewish treasury.

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.

Thus, 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 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 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, 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

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.

In all likelihood, 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!!

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!

Advent and the Christian Year

The Christian year is organized around two cycles. The first is the Christmas Cycle: Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. The season of Advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas and begins the Christian year. In the Christian calendar, Christmas is a twelve-day festival that concludes with Epiphany, which, by Christian tradition, marks the arrival of the wise men.

The second cycle in the Christian year is the Easter Cycle: Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Lent is the forty-day period before Easter. Pentecost, marking the arrival of the Spirit in Jerusalem (Acts 2), falls fifty days after Easter.

Within each cycle, there is a season of preparation: Advent and Lent. These seasons are symbolized by the color purple. Hence, our paraments (the colored altar cloths) have been changed from green (for the “ordinary” time between Pentecost and Advent) to purple.

Purple is the color of both penitence and royalty. We are used to thinking of Lent as a time of repentance and preparation, but I don’t know that “repent” and “Advent” usually go together in our minds. Yet, the traditional Advent scriptures always include the ministry of John the Baptist and his call to repentance. Some of our most enduring Christmas stories, such as Scrooge and the Grinch, are stories of repentance and transformed lives. Advent is to be a time to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Christ-child, our Master and Savior.

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Numbers*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *2 Samuel* +

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.

Scott’s Sunday Class

This Sunday: Christmas Potluck

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel. Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.