

*Prepare the way of the Lord.* [Matthew 3: 3]

I don't think there's anyone here who hasn't given some thought to preparing: where we're going to be on Christmas, or what presents we're going to give. The central message of John the Baptizer, the Forerunner of the ministry of Christ Jesus, was simply this: Prepare yourself. Get ready! Changes are about to occur!

When I was a boy, I spent some years in the Boy Scouts — and they had a motto, which was drilled into us as often as humanly possible: Be prepared! I think that was good advice for a group of high-energy boys moving through our teenage years — not to get lost in the moment, but to be thinking ahead. Back then I thought that Scouts were especially responsible for being prepared. When I entered a building, I looked for the fire exit signs, or made plans on what to do in case of an earthquake, or making sure to have road flares in the car. But after a while I realized how simply "being prepared" was solid advice for anyone who was serious about getting something worthwhile accomplished.

By itself, there's nothing especially spiritual to the advice "Be Prepared." My insurance agent has several policies for our household — is that spiritual? It's true that the Prayer Book admonishes the pastor to advise people, "while they are in health," to make provisions for their heirs and parish family. Making a will is prudent, but not every will is a spiritual preparation.

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Our religious tradition remembers the words of John, the Forerunner of Jesus, as spiritual words — a challenge for a certain kind of preparation. John's words carry a negative tone, since he's confronted by people who think that they've got it made (spiritually speaking). They are already righteous; they're already officially chosen by God. Abraham is their ancestor: end of story. In order to break through such self-absorption, John uses some very harsh words: *brood of vipers! the wrath to come! the ax is lying at the root of the tree!* Should we take those words to heart? Only if we are "officially righteous" people. But if we entertain some doubts about the state of our spiritual self, if we are (even painfully) aware of our spiritual shortcomings, then we should take the consolation offered in the verses of our first reading, from Isaiah, whereby the Peaceable Kingdom is established by a God who "*judges the poor with righteousness, and will decide with equity for the meek of the earth.*"

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A few years ago Joni and I attended a prayer day based on icons at St. Cuthbert's church. We spent silent time gazing at many sacred images from the Orthodox tradition. During the last

part of the day, the leader shared with us the work of preparation for painting an icon, which includes some prayer and even fasting beforehand. The iconographer prepares the wooden surface in a painstaking process, and goes on to prepare the paints one by one, grinding pigment and mixing it with paint made from eggs. The icon is to stay in the church for 40 days before its dedication. I thought of house painting – the really difficult part is not slapping on the paint, but the tedium of preparation – cleaning, sanding, taping, arranging equipment, etc. But if the preparation for painting an icon is itself a genuine spiritual work, then why can't preparation for house painting also be done in a spiritual way? So much of our lives involves preparing for one thing or another. Perhaps we could shift our way of thinking about such preparation and make it a prayer!

So to *Prepare the way of the Lord* can include all the work we're doing to make sure we are ready to celebrate Christ's birth. When we feel frantic, that we are running out of shopping days and shopping funds, we can ask ourselves: "right now, is this thing I'm worried about really preparing the way of the Lord? Or am I preparing my own perfect holiday picture? It is not heresy for us to cut back, where needed, even on Christmas preparedness.

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I've heard of a church where the Pastor was on the lookout for Christmas burnout, and she kept a beady eye on the altar guild, secretaries and choir members for signs of exhaustion, manifested by complaining of how much they were doing. If they complained more than once about their work for that church, she would strongly suggest they take a break from their stressful activities. "Our church is here for the Good News, not to give you the blues," she'd say. After a season or two of this, parishioners at her church didn't complain very much (at least not while she was around) about how hard they were working. Some things were left undone, and it was not always a Martha Stewart production. But at least when those parishioners prepared the way for the Lord, they kept their focus on that place where true joys are to be found.

I pray that all of us, no matter how much we may be working, may keep our balance and find that God is present even as we prepare for the Feast of Christmas, because we can find God present even now, in the spiritual food and drink of the Body and Blood of Christ, given as food for our work of preparation.

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