

“Spiritual Plumbing”

(Mark 1:1-8)

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Last Sunday, Jesus described a creation in turmoil, with stars falling out of the sky and warned us to stay alert for his coming. And Isaiah pleaded that God would rip open the heavens and come among us to dispense justice. And we lit a candle for hope.

This Sunday, we lit the Advent candle for love and John the Baptist introduces the important Advent theme of preparation. He issues the clarion call “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” And by this he means that we should concern ourselves with, in his words, “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

John the Baptist is doing at least three things, when he performs his baptisms. One, he is leading his initiates through a ritual drowning and rebirth, that symbolizes the end of the old life and the beginning of a new life in a family of faith. Two, he is binding these baptisms to the task of confessing and forgiving. And three, he is letting us know that all of this is a preparation for the one who is coming; one who will baptize us with fire and the Holy Spirit.

Making a Straight Path

The question I would like to address today is this: What does it mean to “prepare the way of the Lord by making his path straight?” If you take him literally, it sounds like he’s asking us to go out and clear the road with a snowplow or do road repair or something. His call is clear, but it also seems kind of vague. What exactly is he asking us to do and how can we respond?

First of all, it is clear that John is not primarily asking us to straighten other people out. His concern in this passage is with getting us to straighten ourselves out. What is also clear is that he sees repentance, confession and forgiveness as matters that we should focus on in our preparations for God’s coming.

Faucets

I like to think of us in this passage as being sort of like faucets; that human beings are like water faucets. And that the Holy Spirit is meant to run into us, through us, and out of us sort of the way water runs through pipes and out of a faucet into the house.

On one end is God, the great mystery of love, like a giant reservoir. And on the other end is the house, that represents the world we live in. And each of us was created like a pipeline with a faucet on the end,

through which God could send forth grace and the blessing of life into the world.

And there is nothing more refreshing and delightful than the sound and feel of fresh clean water gushing unimpeded through the pipes and out of a faucet and into a pitcher. What a pleasure to be a faucet in those moments when it seems that God's love is running right through you, unimpeded and out into the world.

And what a beautiful sight it is when you see that love pouring forth from the eyes and mouths of others, when that same love is coursing through them unimpeded.

Maintenance

But things don't always work that way and just as pipes and faucets often require a plumber, we also need spiritual plumbing. Otherwise, there are all kinds of ways in which build ups and blockages can occur, that will prevent the precious waters of the Holy Spirit from flowing through us as it should.

Like spiritual plumbers, we turn on the faucet and listen for a sign of the water of the Spirit gurgling through the pipes toward the faucet. And if things are going well, out it comes. But if things are not going

well, it may be that only a trickle of love and joy appears or maybe there is only a loud groaning of the pipes and nothing comes out. And this tells us that somewhere between the reservoir and the house, the pipes need to be worked on: the path needs to be cleared and the “way needs to be made straight”. And in one form or another, what blocks our spiritual pipeline, separating us from God is sin.

Sin

One of the interesting things about sin is that, even though we can't see or touch it, it is very often represented by things that we can see and touch. So, for example, when the Bible mentions stumbling blocks, it is not talking about actual block sticking up out of the road. It is talking about the invisible obstacle of sin and letting us know that the consequences of tripping over it are every bit as dire as the consequences of tripping over an actual block. There is more than one way you can trip and land on your face.

Sin is also represented as a kind of material accretion; a build up like the shell that hardens around the heart of a person who is unwilling to address the needs of others. And Jesus also speaks of sinful words and deeds as being like the bracken that contaminates a bubbling spring.

When God's love is not flowing through us properly, in some way or another we can surmise that there is some kind of a blockage related to sin that has to be cleared away, so that grace can flow again, unimpeded.

And the blockage that John the Baptist is concerned with in our readings is the inability to forgive. In other words, he is concerned with the grudges that block up the pipe that flows from God through us and into the world.

Have you ever noticed how easily kindness and generosity and friendship flow through you and how good you feel, when you are with people you feel close too. And then conversely, have you noticed how, that same flow can suddenly become only a trickle, when someone you are uncertain about enters the picture?

And have you ever noticed how much your own feelings of wholeness and freedom are connected to whether or not love and grace is flowing freely through you? Or how restricted and imprisoning life feels, when all you are willing to give the world is a trickle?

Dad

Strangely enough, in my own life, it was someone I felt very close to for whom I felt unable to express my love. My dad did not grow up in a

very huggy family and like many of the men of his generation, he did not express intimacy well. When we talked, it was always about some topic somehow removed from our feelings; like two mechanics talking about a car engine. I loved him very much, but whenever I tried to turn the faucet handle on, so that I could say so, no words of love came out. Why couldn't I just say "I love you, Dad?" And so instead I used all kinds of indirect ways to say, what I couldn't say to him directly.

Until one night, when I was almost fifty and he was in his 70's, we were alone together late at night in the living room and the words came pouring out of me. I said it and I hugged him and I think he was amused and he was kind of like a floppy fish in my arms; because he was not really able to hug me back. But that didn't matter.

I'm not exactly sure how to describe this in terms of forgiveness and repentance. But as I look back on it, that was one of the most important and saving moments in my life. Because I do think I would have trouble forgiving myself, had I never once told this amazing man what he meant to me.

I think you could say that, when John the Baptist is calling us to make straight the way of the Lord, he is telling us to be our own Spiritual Plumbers; that the way we prepare to receive God as he comes is by

seeing where grudges and all manner of accretions and blockages have backed things up, and then beginning the work of clearing them out.

The Art of Plumbing

That work, which we can call “Forgiveness” is not that easy. As you all know, it takes experience and hard lessons and often a very long time, and even sometimes the ability to simply forget; In order to deal with grudges or whatever is preventing you from being a straight and honest path for God’s grace.

And even when we have been able to forgive, there is also the question of whether letting a person back into our lives is really consistent with God’s love or is really just letting an abuser continue to abuse. Being kind and generous to the point of being ok with everything, is not the same thing as love.

And interestingly, just as faucets have handles, God gave us the ability to regulate and shape the flow of what comes out of us. So it’s not as simple as turning a faucet off and on. Forgiveness, with all that goes into it, is an art that must be learned over time and through practice.

The Advent Task

So this is the Advent task that the Bible commends to us in preparation for the coming of Christ. It is not what most people think of as the way to prepare for Christmas, but I don't think it has to be inconsistent with what others are doing. Because as others go about their various preparations and get together, there will be opportunities for you to grow in your own practice the art of forgiveness.

My guess is that you intuitively know where the grudges or blockages lie in your own life and you know what needs to be done or not done, to work on making the straight the path for God into our hearts and into the world this Christmas.