

**Sermon Notes:** December 4, 2022

**Focus:** Prepare ye the way

[Lectionary](#)

Every year, preachers around the world get on the same Advent track: Prepare the way for God. Worshippers are exhorted to pray more and slow down. We are getting ready for the adult Jesus to come again in early December, but then we welcome baby Jesus on Christmas Eve. Even though I comprehend the logic, I still struggle with judgement, the messiah, and the end of the world when Santa is everywhere. My festive Christmas cup of coffee delivered by my favorite barista with Bing Crosby playing in the background does not mix well with John the Baptist's wrath.

### **Advent and John the Baptist**

This is the second Sunday of Advent which continues our not-so-feel-good rotation – John is preaching about a brood of vipers and axes cutting down trees. John hated the complicity of Jews with power and used extreme language to shake the listener awake to God's power -- not Rome's glory. He chastised anyone with religious, financial, or military privilege so that they would wake up to God's way and not human ways.

John the Baptist would have some choice words (were he to preach to modern Israel and to us). I am going to touch on my understanding of current Israeli politics on page two. But for now, I am going to stick with scriptural tradition.

### **Matthew**

In the gospel today, Matthew wants you to come to know Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. This Jesus is partial to no one except those who prepare the way of God and make God's path straight. This straight road celebrates God's justice, mercy, and peace. His message was for all of them to reassess their relationship to God and their complicity in creating the cruel world in which they moved.

Let me interpret this in our own context. We all collude with dark forces. We have unearned privilege; we are tempted to give powerful people a pass; we have compromised our ethics, at least once. So, in the Spirit of John:

- Let contentment replace fear.
- Let your money be enough.
- Be satisfied with your lot.
- Love God, bless people, just do your job.

Matthew quotes John as the great preparer-of-the-way-of-the-Lord. Jesus is the one who is more powerful than John and is coming after John. John says, "I am not worthy to carry his sandals." Jesus is in charge, and we do not have to try so hard to make everything and everyone around us conform to our will. We can seek God's will, and that is an Advent way to "prepare ye the way of the Lord"

*This page was biblical. Page two will be political. I offer my understanding of a slice of modern Israeli politics as way to understand our own current American context.*

I hope this political reflection can be a different angle to help us understand ourselves because it is so different, and so like USA 2022. John the Baptist was a political figure and was engaged in the politics of his day. I believe he would be just as outspoken in 2022 as he was back in Jesus' time. Don't care about Israeli politics? Skip to "So?"

**Benjamin Netanyahu** Benjamin Netanyahu is coming back. I know you have heard of "Bibi." He was the former and now prime minister elect of Israel who was indicted on charges of breach of trust, bribery, and fraud. To make a comeback, Netanyahu has built a coalition that makes "Birth of a Nation" look tame (I am not including links if you know, you know). I do not know enough about the modern state of Israel to give you full primer on the country since 1967, but the current move toward the hard right is helpful for us to consider how our own faith and politics form and deform.

**Itamar Ben Gvir** Netanyahu has solicited support from a coalition of right-wing leaders previously considered wing-nuts. First up in the coalition is: Itamar Ben Gvir. Ben Gvir is a lawyer and party leader of *Otzma Yehudit*. He and his party celebrate such "heroes" as Baruch Goldstein, a shooter who killed twenty-nine Muslim worshippers in Hebron in 1994. Also at that time people, including Ben Gvir, were on the front-line stoking political flames that would lead to the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. Rabin was the Israeli prime minister who won the Nobel Prize in 1994 for his work on the two-state solution (Jewish and Palestinian states). Ben Gvir would like to oversee among other roles the Israeli police apparatus. This is a position he has long desired to intimidate Arabs.

**Bezalel Smotrich** Bezalel Smotrich is a leader of the *Religious Zionist Party* who was a settler activist. He holds views like legal segregation in labor and delivery wards (Jewish / Arab). He proudly proclaims being homophobic and will not shake the hands of women. He advocates for the Torah Justice System: the first five books of the Bible should be the basis for modern jurisprudence for everyone in Israel. For Netanyahu, he needs these two men (among others) to make a viable coalition that he can lead. By necessity he is taking a hard right turn to retain power. *Strange bed fellows may be part of politics but easily muddy our preparation of the way of the Lord.*

**So?** If I lived in Israel, I do not know how I would view this. I do not deal with settlements, bombings, and religious lunatics running the government. At least I do not have to deal with the first two. But lunatics running the government? Thank you, Marjorie Taylor Green and your Jewish laser conspiracy, for number three. Jews have a right not to live in fear of bombs, and Arabs have a right not to fear bulldozers. So, it's complicated, but the abuse of power is not.

What I do know is that John the Baptist would have something say. God, not Bibi, is in charge. Love, not fear, wins the day. To resist the will of God cuts us off from the love of God in the same way that an ax cuts a tree from its root. So, like I said on page one: Love God, bless people, do your job, and let your trust in God be Adventy: "prepare ye the way of the Lord."

**Todd**