
Thank God Today for Preparers of the Way

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Advent 2 – Year A

*In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea. ...
This 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!” (Matthew 3:1, 3)*

Prepare the way! I give thanks today for preparers of the way. I thank God today, for preparers of the way.

Every person who has ever appeared on earth, who has ever lived on earth, every person who has ever served on earth, or played, or worked, or thrived on earth, every person has benefitted from someone before them preparing the way.

And so I give thanks today for all those who have prepared the way.

Adam and Eve—our forebearers!—were on earth only after God had prepared the way. It took God five days before the earth was prepared for Adam and Eve to appear on the sixth day.

In the Bible, the rulers of Israel and Judah were enabled by patriarchs and prophets who prepared the way. Jacob, who struggled with God and was thereby named Israel, had his way prepared by Abraham and Isaac. King David’s way was prepared by Saul, and surely by the prophet Samuel, and by Nathan.

No one appears, no one leads, without someone else, first, preparing the way. When our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ, appeared in Galilee, his way had been prepared by his fiery cousin, John the Baptist.

Queen Elizabeth, in Reformation England, had her way prepared by Thomas Cranmer and even by her somewhat flawed father, Henry the Eighth. The other great leaders of our faith tradition did not simply appear from scratch. Their way was prepared by others.

In the arts, the exquisite music of Johann Sebastian Bach appeared after he had studied Buxtehude and Frescobaldi. The music of Ludwig van Beethoven was prepared by the genius of Mozart and Haydn.

In our own great and unique country, we are the beneficiaries of George Washington and our freedom-loving founding fathers and mothers. Abraham Lincoln, elected in a most divisive time for our country, governed decisively in those challenges, and thus prepared the way for the rest of us. Harriet Tubman and Susan B. Anthony prepared the way, as did Eleanor Roosevelt later. I give thanks today for preparers of the way.

The great science of Charles Darwin depended upon the preparation of Alfred Russel Wallace, and the geologist Charles Lyell. Thomas Edison and the light bulb came after the way had been prepared by Alessandro Volta, Humphrey Davy, and Joseph Swan. The genius of Albert Einstein appeared when the way had been prepared by Hendrik Lorentz, Henri Poincaré, and Hermann Minkowski.

Jackie Robinson prepared the way for Henry Aaron!

Vernon Johns – does anyone remember him? He was pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, before Martin Luther King, Jr. was called there.

I remember the seven original American astronauts—Scott Carpenter, Gordon Cooper, John Glenn, Gus Grissom, Wally Schirra, Alan Shepard, and Deke Slayton—who prepared the way for space travel.

Ah! There are so many others! Countless sports heroes depend upon their predecessors. One could say Bart Starr prepared the way for Brett Favre, who then prepared the way for Aaron Rodgers!

Ivan Allen prepared the way for Sam Massell, and then Maynard Jackson. The heroes of all our political contests, great as they might be, are also preparing the way for another generation. The presidents of our corporations manage their intricate systems with the wisdom of others who prepared the way.

So, I give thanks today for all who prepare the way. John the Baptist is our obvious model today, he the one who prepares the way for Jesus. But he is our reminder of so many others who prepare the way.

I would not have a life today if my parents had not prepared the way. And they would not have lived, of course, without their parents. Each of you here today is the product of someone else who prepared your way. Give thanks for them! And give thanks to them!

Our worship here in this beautiful building, our time here, has been prepared by other people – by other clergy, by other parish leaders, by the saints who came before us giving of their time and treasure.

The early founders of the Cathedral Endowment Fund, for instance, certainly did prepare the way. Those early members of this parish adopted the old motto, “Blessed are those who plant trees under which other people will sit.” And, have you noticed lately the new trees that were planted last week on the Overlook point of the Cathedral? We are benefitting from some of those leaders.

We depend upon leaders before us, those who faced great issues and challenges in their own time. Sometimes they faced challenges successfully, and sometimes they actually failed. But simply in addressing those challenges, they prepared the way for us.

John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus. What if we had been Jesus? If we had been Jesus, some of us might not have wanted our way prepared by this John the Baptist, who seems to have been far rougher and far more controversial than Jesus! If we were Jesus, we might have preferred someone kinder and softer, not someone dressed in coarse camel’s hair and leather. As Jesus himself later noted, we might have preferred someone who sang sweet tunes to us and played merry flutes, not someone who would lose his head.

But the way of Jesus was most certainly influenced by the political preaching and direct message of John the Baptist. Jesus would lose his life, too, by upsetting the political authorities.

I thank God today for preparers of the way. Each of you here today, each of you has a predecessor. In whatever you do in life, you have someone who was there before you: the person who was in your job before you, the person who was your own mother, or your father, the people who prepared the way for you.

There was probably a person who lived in your house before you. There was a person who sat in your church pew before you, who voted in your precinct before you. They are preparers of the way for you. Give thanks for them.

Some of them made lots of mistakes. Some of them failed miserably. Some of them were harmful. But even in their errors, they were preparing a way for you. In the goodness and grace of God, God prepared a way through them, even when they were making mistakes. God prepares a way even in forgiveness – maybe especially in forgiveness.

Finally, on this day of giving thanks for preparers of the way, I give thanks for all us together. Because every one of us, we, are all preparers of the way, too. Every one of us, even now, in whatever we are doing, is preparing the way for someone else. We are not the end of the story, and the story is not about us. The story is about the people who come after us, the people we are preparing the way for.

Who are you preparing the way for today? Let us give thanks for them, too.

One of the most brilliant things John the Baptist ever said, even when he was also saying many ill-advised things, one of the most brilliant things he said was that the one who was coming after him was greater than him, and that he—John the Baptist—was not even worthy to carry his sandals.

Then, John the Baptist did something even harder. He got out of Jesus's way. The hardest thing for preparers of the way to do, is to get OUT of the way! We who prepare the way for others—especially we parents!—sometimes find it hard to get OUT of the way. This might be the special gift and goal of grandparents these days. Grandparents teach us how to get out of the way. Do proclaim and do speak. Do guide and do be firm, be clear and strong; but also do get out of the way. Preparing the way does not mean getting IN the way.

And those are my words to all leaders today, to all preparers of the way, in so many ways! "Prepare the way, but don't get in the way." Give thanks for those who have prepared the way without getting in the way.

We are all preparing the way. But, in God's holy grace, the people we are preparing the way for actually represent the spirit of Christ. We are preparing the way for the Jesus who is in these people coming after us. Our children, in some holy way, are Christ among us. The people in our churches, in our cities, in our companies, in our countries, in our world, in whatever institution we serve, those people represent Christ. In preparing the way for these people, we are preparing the way of the Lord!

And so, with Isaiah, and with John the Baptist, and with all the company of heaven, we join in the same words, "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

AMEN.

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