

Sermon 12-6-09

Prepare the Way for the King

Luke 3:1-6

We live in a culture of entertainment. “Without fun there is nothing enjoyable in life” is the philosophy of modern life. So, everybody is seeking entertainment, and the entertainment business is everywhere. I know a Christian scholar who is well-known in the world in his field, aero-space science, a professor of the University of Colorado. One day he told me, “Pastor Cho, you preach very seriously. But, most people today do not expect a deeper message than entertainment from a preacher. We fellow professors sometimes share our experiences from our respective Sunday services during our lunch hour. One of my fellow professors said, “Our jobs are so stressful that we all need to see psychiatrists. But, since it is expensive to see a psychiatrist, it’s better to go to church instead, since it’s free!” The funny thing, for me, was what he quoted his fellow professor saying next: “We need entertainment anyway. Preachers are funny and they make us laugh.” Human beings, however, were created not only for fun, but also for meaning.

When I was a boy, in Korea, there was a band of vagabond merchants moving from one market place to another. They put on an open show for the people who gathered in the market. Typically, a show man would entertain the people gathered there, and then he would introduce some Chinese drugs, saying “This drug is definitely a cure-all!” Their trick of the trade was to make the people laugh and entertain them first, and then sell the drugs. Some uneducated women purchased these various Chinese drugs at a cheap price. These drugs were, of course, all fakes. Today, medical technology in Korea has become highly developed and such spectacles no longer take place.

However, in religious fields, there continue to be many such fraudulent sales persons everywhere, even in the United States. The false truth is that if you have faith you will not meet any problems in your life. There is no such promise in the Bible. Rather, it says that even when you encounter problems, God will be with you. The promise is that God will lead you to find good, even through the problems. As Christian, we are people who look for and follow the way in which God leads us. Today, I would like not to speak, not of a story of fun, but of a mystery in life.

Today’s scripture lesson, Luke 3:1-6, is about John the Baptist’s preaching to the people. John was considered as one of prophets, Elijah, by the people in the New Testament time. He was called to prepare the way of the Messiah. He was a fearless preacher. His message was not fun. Rather, it sounded like the cold wind blown in the desert.

“Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall

be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation." His message was quoted from Isaiah 40:3-5.

The study of humanity is called anthropology. "Anthropology" comes from the Greek word, "anthropos," which means, "looking upon." A human being is different from other animals in the way they look. Most animals walk with four legs, head pointing down to the earth to look for food. But, human beings walk on two legs, head pointing upward to look upon. Humans are made to look for ways, not only on the ground, but also into the heavens to find direction. An idea is a way of looking for direction in human life.

Two young men left together on a trip through a foreign land, untouched by civilization, in a remote desert. They held a map in their hands, drawn by hand, which showed a river, rocks, and some roots of dead trees. When they reached a place where they planned to spend a night, they unpacked their luggage and pitched a tent. There was no house, no road, no traveler, no mountain, no tree, but only a horizontal desert. They pitched a tent on the hillside behind a rock, tied strings to the roots of an old, dead tree, and fell asleep. When they woke up they realized that there had been a storm and a flood in the desert the past night. They had lost everything they needed and the landscape was changed. The rock was located behind their tent, and the roots of the old dead tree had been moved away by the flood. There appeared a creek in front of them. The landscape was totally changed. They were faced with a problem: they were so turned-around that they no longer had any idea as to direction.

They feared that they had completely lost their way because their map was now no use at all. All the markings on the map which indicated the direction, like rocks, roots, and river, were no longer there. They didn't know how to go back home since they had lost their direction in the middle of the desert. Therefore they had to spend another night in the desert worrying about how to go back home.

The night was getting darker and darker, and slowly stars began appearing in the dark sky. And then, one cried out, "I know which direction to go! I see the north star!" The clever young man found the map in the dark sky, the eternal map that cannot be changed. Look up! And find direction for life. That is what it means to be a human being, anthropos.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." (Matthew 2:1-2)

John recalled Isaiah's preaching and used it as the metaphor for preparing a way for salvation. There are three kinds of ways for traveling in our life journey.

The first one is the way we walk in our daily lives. Second one is the truth that we are seeking for, the meaning of life. The Lord said, "I'm the way, truth and life." Third one is the way unpaved, in our hearts. The Lord would like to come to us through this third way. And, there are three kinds of people who need to prepare their hearts in the way that that Isaiah prophesied.

First are those who are living in a valley.

A valley is a hidden place between hills or mountains. There is a valley in our hearts. In the valley of our hearts is hidden guilt. Guilt is the mental price we pay for violating our God-given conscience. We know that if we break a law, we have to pay a penalty. When we break God's universal moral laws, someone has to pay for that, too. But God, out of his deep love for us, sent Jesus to solve that problem. "The reward for sin is death, but the gift that God freely gives is everlasting life found in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That is the gospel we have heard and professed, but there are people who have heard and admitted this message, but still live in the valley of guilt. Talking with people who are depressed, lonely, struggling with marriage problems, alcoholic, or facing almost any problem, I have found that most of them have experienced guilt as part of their difficulties.

About twenty years ago, I was introduced to a twenty-seven year old man who came from Boston. He was sent to Loveland, Colorado, where a Seventh Day Adventist Healing Center was located. The pastor who sent him to Loveland asked me to visit this young man. This young man had a psychological problem and had been treated in various ways, but he was still struggling with his problem. He became crazy sometimes, running out in the middle of night without clothing and shouting. Nobody knew what his problem was.

I visited him in Loveland where he was staying, introduced myself, and told him, "I don't know who you are and what your name is. Probably, I will not see you again. But, I came to here to help you. Will you introduce yourself?" I gave him assurance. He and I talked for a while and he suddenly opened the hidden valley of his heart. "I'm not a good Christian. Everybody who knows me in my church treats me as a good Christian. I was raised in a Christian family and I have a record of good church attendance, and I am a member of the choir. I confess Christ as my savior. But, I am still a terrible sinner.

Finally, he confessed that he had committed a sexual sin against his younger sister when he was a teenager. "It's been ten years, but I couldn't share this incident with anybody because of shame and fear. I couldn't sleep well and when I thought about myself I hated myself. Then I became crazier and crazier." After hearing his confession, I prayed with him and blessed him to get rid of guilt in the name of Jesus. From this moment, he became relieved from his burden of guilt, as well as his craziness.

John the Baptist exclaimed, “Every valley shall be filled in.” By this, he refers to the time when our guilt will be rooted out, when the Savior comes to save us from our guilt.

The second type of people are people who are like a mountain or hill.

I’m higher than you. I’m better than you. I’m more qualified than you. These are thoughts of those with the mind of pride. Everybody has a sort of pride and exhort their children to have pride. Pride involves a trust in one’s power or resources, and a tendency to derive satisfaction from the contemplation of one’s won status, capabilities or accomplishments, especially as these are compared with others who appear to have less.

A classic theological assumption of sin is that pride is the fundamental sin. It is the oldest temptation, the idea Satan poured into Adam and Eve: “You’ll be like God!” The idea that you can be the owner of your own life and make your own life happy comes from the wrong spirit.

Humanity was created by God and was created to live by His spirit. Most cars are made to be run by gasoline. Without gasoline, most cars cannot move (unless it’s an hybrid!). Like cars, humans can live only by the spirit of God. It seems that many people assume the cause of the fall of humanity is sexual corruption. But, this is not so. Sexual corruption is the result of the fall of humanity. The base of sexual corruption is pride, rebellion against God’s will. Pride is self-centered, self-satisfied, and ultimately self-destructive.

Every type of “ism,” sexism, racism and classism are backed by the pride of a sense of superiority, which is against the will of God. A mindset of superiority is a barrier that blocks our total surrender to God. We want to control our own lives, and we misunderstand the meaning of surrender to God. John shouted again, “Every mountain and hill of pride will be made low.”

The third type of people are the people who are like the crooked road or rough way.

The human brain has two parts, left and right. Broadly speaking, the left brain has functions of reasoning while the right brain controls our emotions. If pride is a distortion of mind in regard to others, anger is an emotional distortion toward others. Anger and hate is the crooked and rough state of the heart.

Apart from other humans, we cannot live. However, we are hurt by others and then get angry. Human anger often leads to sin. This is implied in Paul’s warning: “Be angry, and yet do not sin.” Such sin can be expressed in a variety of ways. Vengeance, bitterness, hatred, revenge, and an attitude of judgment all result from anger and all are condemned in Scripture.

God is forgiving and compassionate. For this reason, He at times restrains the full expression of His wrath to give human beings time and opportunity to repent. Forgiving is the best remedy for our mental and spiritual health. This is the time to forgive and be forgiven, to straighten our crooked hearts and to pave smooth our rough minds to receive the King our Savior.

Blessed are those who prepare the way for the King. The un-forgiven, crooked hearts shall be forgiven, and the hurt heart shall be healed by the grace of Lord who will come to you!