

Coram Deo  
Soli Deo Gloria, Soli Deo Gracia, Soli Scriptura  
Sermon preached at Stouffville United Church

Sunday December 3, 2023 by  
Capt Dr. John S. Niles MSM CD

**"Are You Prepared?"**  
Isaiah 40 & Mark 1:1-8

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUk5fzbB2ec>

*The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, [2] and the rough places plain: 5 And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it*

Preparation is an important part of Christmas. Part of the fun of Christmas is the feelings of anticipation and preparation. As we get closer to Christmas day, we all begin to think of all that must be done--shopping, cooking, decorating, unpacking, planning, and family gatherings. We prepare our favorite Christmas food; we look for just the right Christmas tree, and then spend time decorating it. We spend a great deal of time preparing materially, physically and financially for Christmas, but are we prepared spiritually for Christmas? Now, that is what both Isaiah is getting at.

But how do we prepare the way of the Lord in a world that seems so full of chaos, violence, injustice and despair? How do we make straight a highway for our God in a society that is so crooked, twisted and corrupted by sin? How do we clear the obstacles that block our vision of his glory and his grace?

The answer is really rather simple but far from easy: we repent. We turn away from our old ways and turn back to God.

I

If we are to prepare for Christ's coming we must firstly, **come clean**. *"A voice is crying in the wilderness, clear the way, prepare the way for the Lord. Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. " (Isa.40:3)* In other words, come clean. To do this we need to come face to face with ourselves.

Who are you when no one is looking? It is an important question. Often, we are not the people we appear to be. We put up walls, and "fronts". We wear masks that the world around us see, yet we know that this is not who we are.

John the Baptist was standing in a wilderness looking like he was, because by doing so; he was symbolically telling them of the "spiritual wilderness" that they were all in. He was saying, "take a look at yourselves, look at how dry and dead your life has become. It is like a desert, a place of desperation and despair. Come clean. Come and be refreshed.

Yet, do we? Rather, we secure the mask even more firmly not wanting to deal with what we know we need.

A woman was so unhappy about being overweight that one day, she prayed "Lord, if you can't make me thin; as least make my friends look fat."

Here was man who was in a grocery line looking miserable. A woman came up and said, "You must be a minister." The man said, "No, I've just been sick for the past 2 weeks."

Erma Bombeck tells of a story about a woman in church whose child was kneeling on a pew and she was smiling at everyone. She wasn't jumping, kicking tearing the hymnals, she was just smiling. Her mother turned and with a smack said, stop smiling. you're in church.

Christmas isn't about putting on the religious mask. It is about maintaining a relationship with the Lord. It is about coming clean about what our life is really like. It is about no longer hiding, and about opening ourselves up to God in such a way that we will forever be changed. It is about stopping the lying to ourselves and to God. It is about admitting that we need God.

In the book "Life After God." by Douglas Copeland--the generation Xer-- he writes about one of the characters in the book who said as he getting into a pool of water, after peeling off his cloths and feels the water against him and hears the roar of it in his hear. It is, he says, "like a voice that knows only one message, one truth--never-ending, like the clapping of hands and the cheering for hope and that one voice that will speak to them....Now here is my secret: I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God-- that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love. My secret is I need God."

It is only when we stop posturing and pushing our way through life and peel off the pretensions--the masks we hide behind, that we see ourselves as we really are; and come clean about what we really need.

## II

It is only after we come clean, that we can **come close**. It is only after we acknowledge our need that God can come close and deal with it. *"Every valley will be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places smooth..."(Isa.40:4).*

In other words the emptiness will be filled, the obstacles will be removed, the brokenness will be healed, the difficulties will be smoothed.

I was reading an article about Seasonal Affect disorders in the area newspaper the other day. All that seasonal affect disorder means is that you get depressed at different seasons of the year like Christmas. And the reason is because people place all, or have in the past, placed all their hope on special times of the year. And when these times don't live up to their expectations they are left depressed. Often, when the gifts are unwrapped and the boxes are emptied; there is a feeling of emptiness as well within us. This is because we think that our joy is made full in them--in what we get.

Emptiness is a common problem. And both Isaiah and Mark tell us that, "the valley will be exalted"--the emptiness within us will be filled. It is God's desire to fill you. To make your life full--that you might have abundant life--a life filled with joy and peace and hope and love. Aren't these the things we long to have and give at Christmas.

The emptiness is filled, and the obstacles are removed. God removes those things that hinder our coming to him--because it is His desire to come close and bless us.

Author Stephen Ambrose told the story of an American paratrooper unit in World War 2.

Some of you probably read the book, "Band of Brothers." Some of you also saw the TV mini-series that came out a few years ago. I watched most of it on the History Channel not long ago.

One of the few men to survive from beginning to end was Sgt. "Skinny" Sisk. After the war, Sisk had a hard time shaking his memories. In July 1991, he wrote a letter to Capt. Dick Winters to explain. Skinny wrote:

"My career after the war was trying to drink away the truckload of Nazi's that I stopped in Holland... Old Moe Alley made a statement that all the lives I took during the War are going to jump into the bed with me one of these days and they surely did. I [had] a lot of flash backs after the war and I started drinking.

Then my sister's little daughter, four years old, came into my bedroom. (I was too unbearable to the rest of the family, either hung over or drunk.) And she told me that Jesus loved me and she loved me. And if I would repent God would forgive me for all the men I kept trying to kill all over again.

That little girl got to me. I put her out of my room, told her to go to her Mommy. There and then I bowed my head on my Mother's old feather bed and repented, and God forgave me for the war and all the other bad things I had done down through the years.

I was ordained in the latter part of 1949 into the ministry and believe me, Dick, I haven't whipped but one man since, and he needed it. I have four children, nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

The Lord willing and Jesus tarries I hope to see you all at the next reunion. If not I'll see you at the Last Jump." <sup>i</sup>

### III

When we come clean we can come close, and this gives us a reason to **come celebrate**. Then Isaiah says, "*The glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*" (Isa.40:5)

When the emptiness is filled, the obstacles are removed, and the brokenness healed, and difficulties smoothed; what else would we do but want to celebrate. What else would we want to do is give thanks and have it shown forth in our lives.

When Handel wrote Messiah he had gone from riches to rags. For 30 years he had entertained Lords and Ladies with his operas. But those days seemed long past. Creditors were at his door. He was depressed. He could not sleep and he was plagued by rheumatism. He feared he would finish out his days in a London debtors prison. But, two letters arrived that summer of 1741 that would change everything. The first letter was an invitation from the Duke of Devonshire inviting him to the Irish Capital, Dublin, to produce a series of benefit concerts "For the relief of the prisoners in the several gaols (jails), and for the support of Mercer's Hospital in Stephen Street, and of the Charitable Infirmary on the Inn's Quay."

Shortly thereafter a second letter arrived from a wealthy but somewhat eccentric English Land owner named Charles Jennens. He quickly opened the letter. Jennens had written some lyrics for him in the past. To his amazement the letter was a compilation of Old Testament and New Testament scripture passages. George read the words again and again. He was greatly moved and felt impressed to put them to music. Handel locked himself in his study and within 7 days he had completed Part I -- the Christmas section or the oratorio. He presses on to Part II that focused on the Redemption and 9 days later that was finished. Then, in less than a week he completed Part III - The Resurrection and Future Reign of Christ portion.

The first presentation of Messiah was a charitable benefit. When Handel died, now wealthy from his success, he left the score of Messiah to a public Hospital where it supported the care of the poor and the sick.

Charles Burney, 18th century music historian, remarked that Handel's Messiah "fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and fostered the orphan."

And just as Isaiah said the "glory of the Lord shall be revealed." And it was. You think about that.

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<sup>i</sup> .KERUX ILLUSTRATION COLLECTION - ID Number: 20439 - SOURCE: Book: Band Of Brothers, Touchstone: 2001 - TITLE: Forgive Me For All The Men I Kept Trying To Kill - AUTHOR: Stephen E. Ambrose - DATE: 2001