

We are all caught up in the Christmas rush. It isn't easy getting ready for Christmas, so many of us can sympathize with a man in Vancouver , Washington who was ready to decorate his house for Christmas. Unfortunately, when the lights were put away the year before, they were simply tossed into the garage with no attempt to store them so they would not tangle. And so he began one of life's most arduous tasks—untangling Christmas tree lights. As he was trying to untangle them in the driveway his daughter arrived home in the family car and promptly drove over them. This brought the man to the breaking point. He told his wife not to be alarmed. Then he sent his daughter across the street where a police officer lived to tell him to also disregard what he would be hearing in a few moments. And then he got his gun and began firing wildly into the pile of Christmas lights on the ground! Later, under arrest for reckless endangerment, he said he thought discharging the gun would help rid him of his anger!!

Many of us can relate with that poor man. Hanging lights on a Christmas tree can be most stressful. Some nice person on the internet has even made a list of Things Not to Say when Hanging Lights on the tree. Let me share some of them with us:

1. "Up a little higher. You can reach it. Go on, try."
2. "What on earth do you do these lights when you put them away every year? Tie them in knots?"
3. "You've got the whole thing on the tree upside-down. The electric pluggee thing should be down here at the bottom, not at the top!"
4. "I don't care if you have just found two more strings....."
5. "You've just would them around and around...I thought we agreed it shouldn't look like a spiral this year?"
6. "Have you been drinking?"
7. "Where's the cat?"

8. And the #1 thing not to say when hanging lights on the tree..."If you are not going to do it right, don't do it at all! Don't just throw them on, like you do icicles. You are worse than your father!!"

It's not easy getting ready for Christmas. Luke, in his narrative concerning the coming of Christ quotes the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation."

The Word of God came to John in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. God called John to prepare the way, because in his infinite love, God was entering the world and becoming a part of human history.

The Baker–Hamilton report is out, recommending significant changes in our policy in Iraq. A week has passed and we are still digging out from the winter storm and trying to get power connected once again. Prices at the gas pumps are creeping up. The body of a father and husband who died trying to save his family was found in Oregon. And, Google reported that Brittany Spears was the most goggled name on the Internet. Into this time of history, the Word of God has come to you and me calling us to prepare the way for the Lord. God in his infinite love wants to enter each and every heart and have a personal relationship with everyone.

The end goal of God's will is plain. God wants humankind to see and experience God's salvation. From the beginning of creation, God had the goal to have all humankind experience his salvation. God's plan is in motion. John was part of that plan, and so are you and I.

Special circumstances surround John's birth. His parents were old. His father had an angelic vision. The angel named John. Everything about John proclaimed him special. Rejecting his father's priesthood—something that was passed down from generation to generation.

When the word of God came to John, he was ready. He entered into the wilderness—not an especially good place to prepare for the coming of the king—and began to preach his gospel of repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sin.

We can try to avoid or escape the truth that we have the same ministry as John. God is coming. God wants a relationship with his creation. You and I have been chosen to prepare the way. We have been chosen by God to be his children. We have been called by our baptism to be God's witnesses and lights. We have been equipped and prepared for our specific, significant ministry. The Word of God has come to us. In the middle of this period of time, while we are Christmas shopping, baking cookies, enjoying the fellowship of others, we are called to prepare the way and witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The preparation that we are engaged in is not for the sake of Jesus. He can take the bounces that rough roads provide, and he does not fear the up and down, narrow, winding mountain roads. The preparation is for us. Jesus does not intrude on us. The Holy Spirit gently draws us to Jesus and Jesus waits for us to open the door. As Revelation 3:20 states, "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hear my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and him with me."

The preparation starts with us. We are the first to open the door, to repent and to be baptized. Repentance is acknowledging our need for Jesus. Repentance is admitting, "we can't." We can't be perfect enough to make ourselves holy. We can't be the people we want to be. Bedazzled and confused, we can't walk the path that Jesus sets before us. We simply can't, but Jesus can.

In baptism, God makes us his own, gives us new life, fills us with the Holy Spirit and commissions us to be his shining lights, witnesses, and body in the world.

We are sent into the world to invite people to give up on their futile efforts to serve powerless idols, to save themselves, or to please God. We offer to them the opportunity to repent—admit their need for Jesus, and the salvation He provides.

The world will never be the same because of a man named John. He prepared the way for Jesus. Nor will the world ever be the same because of us. Our love will make a difference. Our words will accept, encourage and invite. Our lives will shine for Jesus.

AMEN