

**Message – Advent II**  
**The Song of Zechariah Luke 1:68-79; Luke 3:1-6**  
**December 5-6, 2009**  
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**Purpose**

When we think of mighty acts done by mighty people, we don't usually think of John the Baptist. He's not our typical guy whom we would expect to carve the path for the salvation and joy that is to come. He's controversial and his promises are harsh words. He isolates himself, living in the desert, clothing himself in outfits of camel's hair and feasting on locusts and honey. And, when he does emerge, he starts yelling at everyone, "you brood of vipers." But, John the Baptist, he's the one God chooses. He's the stage setter with promises and warnings about lives changed with God's forgiveness. He's the one who paves the way; a prophet, who Jesus claims is so much more than a prophet. He's the one who's so gloriously faithful to God, that he risks his life telling people of God's power for them in the coming of our Lord; the Messiah, the one who saves. He's a holy man, who loves the Lord; equipped by God to live out his faithfulness. John the Baptist, he calls us to prepare a way for the Lord, and he does so with purpose.

Those who live with purpose are about moving toward something of significance.

Over these past weeks, you kindly blessed and supported a team in their journey to Southern Sudan; and for that I give you great thanks. For it is in Southern Sudan, God has placed on our hearts a great purpose. Together, under the leadership of Jennifer and Darryl Ernst, we have built Hope and Resurrection Secondary School. Jennifer and Darryl for many years have lived with the purpose, that education for the young people of Southern Sudan will eradicate illiteracy and transform lives. As you know, the people of Southern Sudan live in their 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of war. Conflict, turmoil and tension are often resolved through fighting. Bit by bit, step by step, they're steadfast in their purpose to carving a new way. Let me tell you of some students with the school who prepare with great purpose.

John wakes early in the morning, while it's still dark. John lives with his father and his father's 3 wives and 18 brothers and sisters in a village about 10 kilometers from school. John says he wants to be in school because he knows that with education, he can help undo the wrong decisions made through war.

So, John stuffs his workbook in his pocket and jumps on his bike to ride the 6 or 7 miles to school every day. John believes that God wants him to be a lawyer, to bring people to negotiation, not battle for change in Southern Sudan.

Isaac Mariel is the oldest of his 2 sisters and 2 brothers and the head of his household since both his parents were killed in the war. A year and ½ ago, when we first met Isaac, he just showed up at the school one day. God told him he needed to be at school. Isaac wanted us to meet his family. So, we rode and rode, to his home, back in the bush, away from the dangers of war. There we met his sisters and brothers and prayed over the graves of his parents. Isaac was planning on walking each day to school; a two hour

drive. With some help from Mary and Jim at the school, Isaac packed up his little family, moved to the village near the school and built a small tukhal for them to live. Isaac attends classes faithfully. He studies diligently and prays that God will continue to provide. He believes God's purpose for him is to go to school, and attend university, also, to become a lawyer. As a lawyer he can return to Southern Sudan and work for what is just and right in a culture that is unjust and oppressive.

Avangelina lives at Hope and Resurrection school. Her father supported her living at the school. But, in October Avangelina's father died suddenly. Now, her brother is responsible for her future. He wants her to come home to live. He needs her to do the chores. And, he wants to take her to the cattle camps to marry her off. If she marries a cattle herder, he's certain to get plenty of cows and that will make her brother rich. Avangelina's home is just a few miles from school and not too far a walk. But, on her journey she has been accosted by some cattle herders. They don't want her in school. Because, when you go to school, you change. School is a way to prepare for the purpose God has in store. God's purpose is about living in freedom, not under oppression and abuse. At Hope and Resurrection Avangelina isn't spending her every free moment carrying water, cleaning, building the fire and cooking meals for the 36 children of her father's six wives. In talking with Avangelina, the first words she shares are not words of worry and complaint because of the lack of support she gets at home. Instead, Avangelina prophesies with true heart, that God is good. She knows that God will protect her.

John and Isaac and Avangelina and most of the the eighty some remaininig students with Hope and Resurrection School trust in God's purpose for them. They must. They don't have a lot of support at home. Their parents and guardians don't understand the importance of education. The students tell me their parents are largely illiterate and don't see the need in learning to read and write. So, school just isn't a priority. Most students have to make the studying work in between their farming the fields, and caring for their brothers and sisters. They live with hope that through education their lives will be resurrected, raised up, new and made whole; that with education they will serve as the very messengers for others to live with Hope and Resurrection. So, with the Lord's help, they prepare a way. They study and struggle to learn. "God is good," they sing out, "all the time, all the time." They trust in how God prepares them with purpose to do something good for the welfare of Southern Sudan.

For some of us, maybe for many of us, we wonder exactly what the purpose is God has in store for us. Maybe it just isn't so clear right now. Kind of like, a what am I supposed to be when I grow up? Maybe that's why it is that we're called to prepare. For John the Baptist, his preparation is a desert time. John, we remember is the son of faithful priest, Zechariah, descended from the priestly tribe of Aaron. Zechariah doubles his priestly merit in his marriage to Elizabeth, who is also descended from Aaron. God, lavishing his purpose upon Elizabeth and Zechariah in their old age, blesses them in the birth of their son John; and through the angel Gabriel, the purpose is made known: before he's even born, he's great in the sight of the Lord. He'll return the lost to the Lord. He'll serve as a

reconciler in restoring families. God calls him to bring the disobedient to righteousness. He's to prepare God's people, make them fit, faithful followers of the Lord.

I imagine those desert times for John are times of wonder and uncertainty about how God equips him to be such a mighty prophet. Deserts are often those uninhabited places, where only a few can journey with us; into a solemn return to God; where we go to pray, earnestly, and where if left to our own devices, we really can't survive; where, in the loneliness of our barren souls, God prepares us, and where we find strength and courage in the Lord our God. Now, in the desert, we don't stay and languish. In fact, the desert is that place of renewal and growth and if we're truly honest with ourselves and with God, we emerge with daring and bold purpose. So it is with John the Baptist, as he emerges, with the word of God upon his heart into a world troubled and torn, as the Prophet Most High, telling God's people to prepare; that the salvation of God is at hand; that because of God's faithful love, a light will shine in the darkness, and we will be guided into the way of peace. He makes his purpose known with the words of the prophet Isaiah who long ago spoke to God's people when they lived in their desert times, in exile in Babylon: "...prepare the way for the Lord, make his paths straight! Let every valley be filled in, every mountain and hill be leveled, winding ways be straightened and rough roads made smooth..." and then he reminds us, "one who is more powerful than I is coming..."

We are all about preparing for the purpose of God.

Living with purpose means we're intentional in making a choice between alternatives. This Advent season, as it is every year at this time, lights are glittering, Christmas carols are playing; we cook and bake and visit and shop and wrap and decorate. And, adding all this extra activity this time of year doesn't mean we let go of other purposes in our lives. No, instead, what we do, is we just make room. We rearrange and stack and move aside things to make space. And making it all work, fitting in all the festivities and plans, it's fun, most of the time. But, my guess is, sometimes, in all our preparations, for this holy Christmas, we lose sight of the purpose. What if this year, we choose to live making a choice between our alternatives. What if this Advent season, we take the message of John the Baptist into our hearts and live with one single purpose, preparing a way for our Lord.

What paths in our lives must we make straight? Empty spaces, how do we fill them? What bumps and upheavals must we now level? Where the rough places are, what do we need to do to make them smooth?

Our friends in Sudan live with great purpose in bringing peace and reconciliation to their worn torn country through education. Our prophet John the Baptist cries out passionately for us to know the Lord our God. All go about their purpose. None go about their purpose without preparation. And, so it is with us. We prepare to be the very purposeful people of God. We trust, and gather, and worship, and pray, and love and show compassion and mercy. So, this Advent, instead of whipping out the over loaded credit card one more time, to buy the unnecessary present,...maybe there's another way. Take the Advent Devotional from your bulletin. Gather and pray it this week. Leaving

worship today, check out the Giving Tree. Take an ornament off the giving tree, follow the directions and help the students with Hope and Resurrection School. This morning the loose plate offering benefits the Food Bank. Give generously and tell friends and family this is the gift you've given in their name this year. Or maybe your preparation time this Advent is inviting others to worship with you. We worship every day. Weekdays at 7:45 a.m. and 5:45 p.m. and weekends 5:30, 9:00 and 10:45. And if this Advent is a wilderness time for you. Spend time in prayer and study of scripture. Draw close to Jesus. Discover what it is the Lord asks of you.

The prophet tells us to prepare and our lives will be changed. We're given this gift of this holy season to prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of the greatest gift of all, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Let's be ready and be surprised in how he calls us to be his most faithful, loving, holy people, and rejoice in his purpose.