

# “To Prepare His Ways”

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Luke 1:67-80*

Advent, the time of preparation, getting ready. Zechariah and Elizabeth certainly did a lot of preparing. John, the Baptist – their son – did his share of preparing.

Now – it’s our time to prepare; as father Zechariah wrote, sung of his son –  
“To prepare His ways”  
“To prepare God’s ways”  
“To prepare for a vision, a way of life!”

The people, under foreign rule, not free in their own land – were getting prepared. John was to assist in getting them ready for what would change their lives, and the lives of billions of other children of God.

In preparing for the birth of Jesus – we are preparing for God’s ways – God’s purpose, God’s meaning for and into our lives! As we prepare once again – the preparation is for Christ’s ways to permeate our lives, and the lives of those we share this wondrous “way”, “message” with. In my preparation for this sermon, I found these statistics; 66% of Americans say Christmas is one of the nations most important holidays. Only 6% say it is one of the least important holidays of the year. That seems high – there are more Grinch’s out there than I thought. Or of course, perhaps they don’t know American history and its contemporary manifestations, very well. Ignorance could trump the Grinch/Scrooge factor. Hooray! 92% of adults say they will celebrate Christmas. 2% are not sure. And yes Virginia (do the math) 6% will not. (But take into account, our Jewish, Muslim and other religious “friends” that takes the Grinch/Scrooge factors way, way down.)

And in good company of this John the Baptist and his proclamations – speaking of the Grinch/Scrooge factor, in your face atheists are at it again. Amid the beautiful and glorious Christmas decorations gracing our cities and town – buses and trains in Washington D.C. are heralding (with fundamentalist gusto) atheistic slogans such as; “No god...No problem!” Featuring the smiling faces of people wearing Santa hats. “Be good for goodness sake.” They are scheduled to appear in other major cities.

The executive director of the American Humanist Association shares, “We don’t intend to rain on anyone’s parade, but secular people celebrate the holidays too, and we’re just trying to reach out to our people... To the degree that we are reaching out to the godly, it’s just to day you can be good without god. So their atheist neighbor down the street shouldn’t be vilified as though his is immoral.”

Whoa! - on so many levels!

- Vilification of atheists among Christians is extremely low. It’s that Jesus thing about “loving your neighbors.” Tilting at windmills continues.
- Sure you can be good without god – but where did this “good belief” come from? What culture imbued these atheists with this particular belief about being good? A hint – Christianity.
- And secular people, defined by the Humanist, “atheists”, “celebrate the holidays too.” First he may want to use a different word than holiday – taken from the Old English meaning “holy –day”. Secondly,

sure celebrate! But why celebrate on one of the most important Holy –days of a religion that identifies one out of three people in the world as followers of this baby born in a manger? Why not pick another day, another time? You can pick any day – after all – nothing’s sacred!

One response from some of those vituperative, vilifying Christians was to place on buses the famous Sistine Chapel image of God’s finger reaching out to Adam with the words, (If there are young children, you may want to cover their ears,) ready? “Why believe? Because I created you and I love you, for goodness sake – God.”

How dare they!!

Preparing for His ways!

And I can’t let this go either. I’m on a roll, or you might call it a tear. This month’s “The Atlantic” has produced an extended essay that disappoints, and more than that, indicts with such innuendo, and lack of facts – our Christian faith. Of course, the title is much more inflammatory than the actual writing, but it seeks to do its damage.

The title? Did Christianity Cause the Crash? (referring to the housing crash of last year.)

Christianity – for the radical secularists is an easy target, and one they really need not fear. From the beginning its history is flawed, declaring (better setting up its straw man) that “America’s main stream religious denominations used to teach the faithful that they would be rewarded in the afterlife. But over the past generation, a different strain of Christian faith has proliferated – one that promises to make believers rich in the here and now.” It’s called the prosperity gospel.

First, America’s mainstream, besides teaching rewards afterlife – have historically taught social involvement in one’s community, nation. It included a “Protestant work ethic” and a belief in God’s interest in your future in the here and now. Please, by no means am I defending the “Prosperity Gospel”, but Christianity’s involvement in the social-cultural realm is so much more nuanced than this essay recognizes or allows. It declares that “The message that Jesus blesses believers with riches first showed up in the postwar years...” The writer should read Russell Conwell on Christianity and worldly success, circa 1915. Speaking to Christians in 1915; “...you ought to have money. If you can honestly attain unto riches...it is your Christian and godly duty to do so.”

Just an example of the lack of historical knowledge within this essay. Risk taking and intense material optimism is excoriated, all with a Christian identity. Actually – within measure and within limits such are the reasons for the prosperity of our nation. It’s all in the nuance.

The Prosperity Gospel – as defined – is but a small segment of Christianity. Its abuse needs to be criticized, but with much more awareness of Christianity’s history and with the non-conflation of positive aspects of the Gospel and its social/cultural outcomes. (Parenthetically and its direct social impact of believers looking to their futures in the here and now – to see that “all that glitters isn’t lead.”) There are disturbing facts of collusion between housing agents and pastors – in minority areas of our nation. Wrong!

Again, the title – of course, declared to catch one’s attention – “Did Christianity Cause the Crash?” is too big and the innuendo is yes it did! Christianity’s - Prosperity Gospel – embraced by minorities and some of the majority – by being blindly guided by those preachers – bought homes they could not afford, believing God would supply.

Therefore: Christianity Caused the Crash!

My friends, humbly endeavoring to follow John's ways of preparing, I offer these concerns and criticisms out in our culture;

To prepare His ways!

And to show I endeavor to be fair, David Brooks, Secular and Jewish, writing for the New York Times, writes about America, "This eschatological faith in the future has motivated generations of Americans..." He has on numerous occasions noted the strong religious impulse historically presented in our nation – that enshrines this forward looking, preparing for the future – mentality.

Brooks is concerned that we are not confident in our future, and we need to be. He hopes for us "to salivate for the future again." He ends his column, "As the financial crises eases, it would be nice if Americans would once again start looking to the horizon." He is speaking politically/socially/culturally. As for our Christian faith – the antecedents of the American ethos – were formed through the Judeo/Christian ethos. This is not to imply exclusion of our faith traditions within this melting pot, but there are foundational tenets that must be kept! There is a naïveté about "how we got here." That's the reason we must not be silent, and we must seek to prepare His ways – ways that transcend narrow parochialism – but maintain the foundation of what is good and just.

As Christians, our faith has transformed the world, adding much good and justice in its path. It has its blemishes, and failures – historically – but overall it has enhanced our world!!

It's our turn, in this generation to continue the quest, to prepare His ways.

Amen.