

12.23.2018 Advent 4 (Isaiah 40:1-11, Luke 3:1-17)

Jim Elliot was only 28 years old when he and four other missionaries were killed while trying to share the Gospel with a remote tribe that lived deep in the jungles of Ecuador. Throughout his life, this young missionary kept a journal detailing his personal thoughts on God, obedience, and sacrifice. In one of his journals, he wrote this heartfelt prayer: “Father, make of me a crisis man. Bring those I contact to decision. Let me not be a milepost on a single road; make me a fork, that men must turn one way or another on facing Christ in me.”

This morning, as we stand on the brink of the celebration of our Lord’s birth, we recognize the same deep, profound desire in the man at the center of our second lesson: John the Baptist. John is not only the perfect example of a man whose desire was to be this great fork in the road where a person confronts Christ and must decide which way to turn, John was the first example, the original, the one who all that have come after should strive to follow. “*Even from his mother’s womb*” (Luke 1:15), John was filled with the Holy Spirit, and Scripture provides a beautiful account of the way he “*leaped*” (Luke 1:39-45) in his mother’s womb as she greeted the blessed virgin Mary, who was carrying within her, the Savior of the World. So, we see that even before his birth, before he spoke his first word, John the Baptist was ordained by God to be “*The voice of one crying in the wilderness.*” He was called by God the Father Almighty to “*prepare the way of the Lord,*” to “*make His paths straight*” (Isaiah 40:3, Luke 3:4).

*Even from his mother’s womb*, John knew that his calling was to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. John’s father Zechariah was a priest from the tribe of Levi, a descendent of Aaron the first High Priest of Israel. John’s mother Elizabeth was also a descendent of Aaron (Luke 1:5). With such a bloodline, one would expect John to serve and offer sacrifice in the Temple like his father before him, but his role in the kingdom of God would be one of far greater importance. The sacrifice he offered would not be made in Jerusalem with the blood of bulls and goats, John’s sacrifice would instead be one of his own soul and body. His was a living sacrifice, a life devoted to his calling to *prepare the way of the Lord*, by preparing the hearts of all people, so that the “*King of Glory*” (Psalm 24) could enter in, and occupy the throne

He truly desires, the throne within each one of us that we all too often wrongfully claim as our own.

Preparing the human heart is not an easy task, and our lessons today use imagery that is meant to remind us of the massive, and very difficult engineering projects of those who built roads for the ancient kings and their armies. These road builders prepared the way for the king by filling in ravines, clearing away obstacles, and building up roads that provided direct, unobstructed travel. Holy Scripture portrays John the Baptist as a road builder, but one of a different kind, for he is the man who prepares the way, making a straight path for the King of Kings. As the prophet Isaiah declares: *“Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain”* (Isaiah 40:4).

John would not *prepare the way of the Lord* by moving rocks and trees, but by moving the heart. He would not use physical force, he would use his voice, *the voice of one crying in the wilderness*. The valleys to be exalted through his cry were the depressed and the despairing. The mountains and hills to be brought low at the sound of his voice were the proud and the arrogant. John cried out to the crooked and the rough with these words, *“O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance...”* (Luke 3:7-8a). In these verses John calls out to every kind of human heart. The Baptist was preparing the way of the Lord by proclaiming the Truth, compelling all who heard his cry to turn one way or another on facing Christ in him.

John cried out: *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”* (Matthew 3:2), and in our lesson we find that many heard his cry, and on facing Christ in him, wondered how to respond. St. Luke tells us that *“the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then? He answereth and saith unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise. Then came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do? And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you. And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages”* (Luke

3:11-14).

The people, the tax collectors, and the soldiers each asked, “*What shall we do?*” and John had a personal answer for every group. When we stand at that great fork in the road, and by the grace of God choose Christ, He calls us to respond in different ways according to our own God-given gifts and the different circumstances in our lives. John tells us that if you’re a tax collector, be honest, if you’re a soldier, be civil, and if you’re a person, be compassionate, be generous, and reach out to love and care for your neighbor. As we each respond in different ways, fulfilling our particular calling in the kingdom of God, valleys are exalted, mountains and hills are brought low, and that which was crooked or rough is made straight and smooth. A “*highway for our God*” (Isaiah 40:3) is paved in a decision for Christ, a penitent heart, and an obedient response.

Through the prophet Malachi, God said of John the Baptist, “*Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before Me*” (Malachi 3:1). From his mother’s womb to the day that Herod so unjustly ordered John’s head be given on a platter to a dancing girl (Matthew 14:8), John prepared the way of the Lord as only he could. His single, life-long desire is expressed in these words he spoke about Jesus, John said, “*He must increase, but I must decrease*” (John 3:30). The Word of God declares the truth that John was “*a burning and a shining light*” (John 5:35) in a world trapped in darkness, but when God sent His only Son to rise, such a lamp was no longer necessary. The work of the greatest prophet was complete (Luke 7:28). It was time for the “*greatest among them born of women*” to leave this earth (Matthew 11:11), to rest in Paradise, and to eagerly await the day that Christ would finish His work and would come to lead the souls of the righteous dead to their heavenly reward.

In conclusion, as we consider the end of John’s life, we turn once again to a journal kept by Jim Elliot, the martyred missionary who gave His life for Christ as he prepared the way of the Lord in the jungles of Ecuador. Elliot wrote, “When the time comes to die, make sure that all you have to do is to die.” As difficult as it is to reflect on the tragic death of John the Baptist, Jim Elliot, or the deaths of countless Christian martyrs, there is great peace in the knowledge that when the time came for them to die, there were no regrets, no

what-ifs, nothing left undone. They “*fought the good fight... finished the race... kept the faith*” (2 Timothy 4:7), and their good examples are written for us. May God give us grace and courage to follow them. May we be blessed with the same unrelenting spirit and unquenchable love for God that leads a person to pour out their life as *a living sacrifice*, pointing the world to Christ, building a *highway for our God*, and preparing for the day when we shall see our Salvation in the Person of Jesus Christ.