Preparing the Way

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Preparation; Expectation; Advent / Malachi 3:1–4; Lk 1:67–79; Philippians 1:3–11; Luke 3:1–6

Good morning, everyone.

When I think about preparation, I'm drawn back to the Christmas holidays of my childhood. Every year, my parents and I would set off for the Wild Coast of South Africa, one of the most remote and beautiful places you could imagine. These trips were nothing like modern holidays with convenience stores nearby or easy access to essentials. We had to bring absolutely everything we would need for the four weeks we were away because there were no shops, no quick runs to pick up forgotten items, and no second chances.

Our trusted *bakkie*—a South African pickup truck—would be loaded to capacity. Petrol for the generator, gas for cooking, firelighters, wood for the barbecue, all our clothes, and cooler boxes filled with food to last as long as possible. Once we arrived, we would rely on fish my parents caught or seafood bought from local fishermen. The roads to these places were dirt tracks in poor condition, winding through rugged terrain, and the campsites themselves were simple. At best, we'd have cold water showers; at worst, we'd wash in the rivers.

Yet, for all the challenges, those trips were magical. There was a sense of adventure and simplicity, of relying on one another and enjoying what we had. Often, we camped with one or two other families, and a strong sense of community grew among the campers. Even as a child, I could feel the love and effort my parents put into those trips. They weren't just about getting away; they were about creating something memorable, something special.

Advent is much the same. It's a season of preparation, a time to get ready for something—and Someone—truly special. But it's not the kind of preparation that happens in a rush or without thought. Like our camping trips, it requires care, intention, and a willingness to think about what is truly necessary. Just as my parents packed the essentials for four weeks in the wilderness, Advent invites us to think about what we need to bring with us on our journey of faith and what we might need to leave behind.

Preparing for Christ is about making space in our hearts and lives for Him. In Malachi's prophecy, we hear of a messenger coming to prepare the way, refining and purifying God's people like silver or gold. It's a vivid image, isn't it? Refining involves fire and heat; it's not a comfortable process, but it's one that reveals beauty and value. Similarly, Advent calls us to allow God to refine us, to clear away the distractions, sins, and fears that might block His presence in our lives.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329–390)

From his Oration 38, on the Nativity of Christ:

> "Christ is born, glorify Him!
> Christ comes from heaven, go out to meet Him!
> Prepare your hearts as a temple,
> your souls as a manger,
> your lives as a pathway for the King.
> Let the rough places of sin be smoothed,
> the crooked ways of pride be made straight,
> that the glory of His coming may dwell richly among you."

John the Baptist's call echoes this urgency: "Prepare the way for the Lord; make straight paths for Him." His message wasn't just for the people of his time. It's for us, too. Advent is a chance to examine our lives honestly, to ask where the crooked paths need straightening, where the obstacles need clearing. It's not always easy work, but it's necessary if we want to fully welcome Christ.

What I remember most about those camping trips is how everything became simpler. Without the comforts of home, we learned to focus on what really mattered. Meals shared around the fire, laughter under the stars, the beauty of the coastline—it wasn't about what we didn't have; it was about what we did. Advent preparation is much the same. It's about simplifying, focusing on the essentials of faith, and making room for the hope, peace, joy, and love that Christ brings.

Zechariah's song, the *Benedictus*, captures this beautifully. It's a song of gratitude and anticipation, praising God for fulfilling His promises and guiding us into the path of peace. That peace isn't just an absence of conflict; it's the fullness of life with God. Preparing for Christ means opening our hearts to that peace, letting it transform us and flow into our relationships and communities.

Paul's words to the Philippians remind us that we're not alone in this preparation. "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion." God is already at work in us, shaping us and guiding us as we prepare for Him. Just as my parents' careful planning made our camping trips unforgettable, God's work in us prepares us for the joy of encountering Him.

So, as we journey through this Advent season, let's think about how we're preparing. What are the "non-essentials" that need clearing away? What are the essentials we need to hold onto—prayer, reflection, acts of kindness? And how can our preparation make space for Christ's peace, not just for ourselves but for others?

Just like those camping trips, Advent preparation isn't about perfection. It's about love and anticipation, about creating space for Christ to dwell in us and among us. And when we prepare with intention, we'll find that the journey itself becomes part of the joy—a chance to reconnect with God, with one another, and with the hope that only Christ can bring.

As I've been sharing, Advent is all about preparation—about clearing the way and making space for Christ. But preparation isn't always neat and tidy. Sometimes it's messy, full of bumps along the way, like those Christmas camping trips I mentioned earlier. There's scrambling, a bit of improvising, and hopefully some laughter along the journey.

In reflecting on those memories and the Advent season, I was inspired to write a little poem, with the help of ChatGPT. It's called *The Path Made Ready*, and I think it captures both the joy and the challenge of preparing for something—or Someone—truly special. Let me share it with you.

> **The Path Made Ready**
>
> The road is bumpy, the *bakkie* is full,
> We've packed it all—no room to pull.
> Through dirt-track paths and potholes wide,
> We pray the axle can survive the ride.
>
> No shops around, no chance to restock,
> The fridge is tiny, and the cooler's on lock.
> We'll eat the fish if Mum can catch,
> And barter for crabs—it's quite the match!
>
> "Prepare the way," the preacher cries,
> But all I see are stormy skies.

> “Clear the clutter,” the message lands,
> Yet I’m still holding too much in my hands.

> It’s not what we lack but what we hold—
> The simple joys, the stories retold.
> A campfire’s glow, a starry night,
> And hearts made warm by shared delight.

> Advent calls us to pack with care,
> To leave behind what we can’t bear.
> Make space for Christ; let peace take root,
> And find His joy in the simplest pursuit.

> So tidy your heart, and smooth the way,
> For the Lord is coming this Advent day.
> He’ll come with love, and light, and cheer—
> And no, He doesn’t mind the camping gear.

Closing Prayer:

Heavenly Father,
We thank You for this season of Advent, a time to prepare our hearts for the coming of Your Son. Help us to clear away the distractions and fears that keep us from fully receiving Him. Guide us in our preparation, and fill our lives with love and anticipation. May we reflect the hope and peace of Christ in all we do, sharing His light with those around us.
In Jesus’ name, Amen.