*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” A voice says: “Cry out!” And I said: “What shall I cry?” All flesh is grass; their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers; the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers; the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah: “Here is your God!” See, the Lord God comes with might, and His arm rules for Him; His reward is with Him and His recompense before Him. He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms and carry them in His bosom and gently lead the mother sheep.*

Isaiah 40:1-11

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah: “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight.’” So, John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed: “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of His sandals. I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”* Mark 1:1-8

 *A boy came late to Sunday School late. Knowing he was usually very prompt, his teacher asked: “Johnny, is there anything wrong?”*

 *“No, not really,” he said,” I was going to go fishing, but dad told me to go to church.”*

 *The teacher was very impressed and asked Johnny if his father had explained to him why it was more important to go to church than to go fishing.*

 *“Yes ma’am, he did,” Johnny said. “My daddy said he didn’t have enough bait for both of us.”*

Prepare the Way

1. Every year, with the beginning of Advent, (sometimes, even before Advent arrives) from many pulpits we hear the words of the prophet Isaiah, which are also found in the Gospel of Mark as spoken by John the Baptist: *“Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight.”* The prophet Isaiah spoke his words long before John the Baptist did, but the peculiarity of these words lays in the fact that today, once again, we must repeat these words, not necessarily because we celebrate Advent once again, but because they have become relevant again. *“Prepare the way of the Lord”* must be a message and a cry of all Christians, because we live in the secular if not the *“neo-pagan”* world. Just a couple of weeks ago, I read about the *“Christmas trees”* display in the *“railroad museum”* in Wisconsin, where one of the displayed trees is dedicated to Satan and exhibited by the *“satanic temple.”* That’s what Christmas celebration has become in our world today.

2. *“Prepare the way of the Lord”* in Isaiah prophecy was about the promised Messiah who will come one day, while John the Baptist spoke about the Messiah, he knew has already arrived but not yet become active in His ministry. Consequently, Isaiah and John, they both were calling on people to turn away from their abandonment of God and to once again embrace Him. This is not really different from what we as Christians face and call for today. Wherever we turn we witness how the world is not only abandoning God, but trying to convince people that as the humanity we, humans, are *“gods.”* What Isaiah and John were doing was trying to get people to see the severity of their sin, the danger it posed on them, and they both tried to install in them the sorrow over the sin that controls people’s lives. It is nothing new to realize that sin infects every part of our being, every thought, word, and action, but today we do not like to use the word *“sin,”* replacing it instead with *“addiction.”* Notwithstanding that however, any addiction, whether to drugs, alcohol, sex, greed, hate, envy, the list goes on and on, the *“addiction”* is nothing else but sin! What we as humanity need, is God’s forgiveness, and John is unequivocal in this that the source of that forgiveness is Jesus who personified love of God when He appeared in the flesh when born in Bethlehem. For the prophet Isaiah the One who would bring the joy of forgiveness is the coming Messiah, but for John the Baptist it is Jesus, who has arrived at the same time as John was born.

3. Today’s world is like a vacuum chamber, where people, especially the young and the innocent, were never exposed to the loving relationship with God. It is the world where even the Church have often forgotten what the true love of God is, and where many Christians find themselves in the spiritual vacuum, suffering, because God has been replaced by many different ideologies and the social trends they embrace. In such environment, where everything but God, and His forgiveness, are important, how can anyone *“prepare the way of the Lord?”* This is why Advent is important, even if only to remind people that we need the time to prepare for the Lord to come once again into the human heart. After all, what good is Christmas if we don’t see a need for forgiveness offered us by the Savior, whose birth we will celebrate in just a couple of weeks? What good will His Second Advent be, if we want to stand on our own, confident that our *“good works,” “good behavior,”* offer us eternal salvation?

4. All the so-called major religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Unitarianism, Mormonism etc., claim that salvation may be attained by the person’s self-efforts, yet, in reality, nobody is able to obtain salvation through self-achievement. It is only through the blood of Jesus Christ people be cleansed from the depth of sin and be forgiven. Through the celebration of Advent, we prepare our hearts, we identify where sin has taken a hold of us, and consciously purge it from our lives. Only when we realize what our sins are and we repent, we may turn away from sin, with the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit. To *“prepare the way of the Lord”* as we get ready to celebrate Christmas, is the same way John got people ready for Jesus’ ministry, and in fact, it is the same way we, those who know Him, remain ready for His Second Coming. It is by embracing Him for who He is, the Savior of the world.

5. Someone said that *“without repentance Christmas is just a Christmas Tree, Santa and presents, a family or church traditions that is devoid of any eternal meaning. Only with repentance and trust that God has forgiven us, which we see in Jesus’ first arrival, we have the assurance that God loves us. The certainty of forgiveness depends on God’s promise to send the Savior, and this was fulfilled with the coming of Jesus.”* Isaiah and John paved the way for Him and they call on us to do the same. After all, if we forget why Jesus came, all the *“hoopla”* about Christmas is just that, a *“hoopla”* without any meaning. We, the Church, have great obligation to prepare the way for those who do not know the way to God. No, we are not able to offer them salvation, but we are able to show them the way to the One who offers forgiveness and salvation.

6. As we *“prepare the way of the Lord”* for others, we do it with love. We cannot force anyone to follow Christ, we cannot discipline others or to force anyone to follow our ways, we must teach them in love, but with honesty and truth. We also cannot force anyone to learn to accept our view as the only true one, but we must help them to discern it on their own. We must teach others, but unlike many schools today where students graduate whether from the high schools or colleges only barely able read and write or as academic institutions where the teacher is *“always right,”* and the teacher’s view is the proverbial *“gospel,”* our role is that of a guide, just as John was for his contemporaries. Truth is, the children who are loved, cared for with affection, and respect, and even with discipline, are less likely to run amuck, then the children who are missing these elements in their family life. As Christ’s Church we are but a *“family,”* and we carry the weight of the responsibility for the members of this *“family,”* whether they are the actual children or *“the children of faith,”* pursuing maturity in faith. I like the description of maturity I found in my search: *“The real sign of maturity is being able to plant trees under which shades we will never sit.”*

7. As we continue to prepare our hearts this Advent, we must stay focused on our Savior and the blessings He offers. In preparation for the celebration of Christmas we must then self-examine ourselves and find where we stand spiritually, and what our service in the name of our Savior must be. There is an old hymn that I like very much: *“Tell Mother I’ll be There.”*

*I promised her before she died for heaven to prepare*

*O Savior tell my mother I'll be there*

*Tell mother I'll be there in answer to her prayer.*

This song shows us the way the mother *“prepared the way of the Lord”* for her child, through prayer, through love, through empathy and understanding. This is what *“preparing the way of the Lord”* is in our modern, neo-pagan world. People need to know they must repent of their sins, and know that their sins may be truly forgiven, but only by the One who was promised to do so, and who came *“on Christmas Day.”* Jesus lived and died to save us all. We as His Church know this, so, we must tell others to focus on Him, on the One who will return some day.