

The First Boy Scout (Luke 3:1-6)

Growing up in Arizona, much of our family quality time centered on the outdoors. Many summer weekends were spent camping and fishing in the cool mountain streams of Northern Arizona. At other times of the year I hunted with my dad and brother. The thing I remember most about our outings is that they usually began with some forethought and preparation. My dad always had a plan.

And he fanned my enthusiasm for being prepared at an early age. He taught me a game he played as a kid growing up on the farm in central Illinois. He wanted to be a bush pilot in Alaska. He kept that dream alive through a surprising medium: The Sears & Roebuck mail order catalogue.

In his spare time, my dad would plan treks to Alaska by making detailed provision lists using catalogues. Working from a self-imposed budget he would spend hours refining his lists, looking at maps, and planning routes.

I also enjoyed this game as a youngster. But at the age of ten I discovered why it's important to be prepared. A single "practical" experience taught me that to get caught unaware and unprepared, especially in the wilderness could be a matter of life and death. At the very least, I learned that being unprepared takes all the fun out of the wilderness experience.

I learned first hand why the Boy Scout motto is "Be Prepared." Having earned the rank of Tenderfoot, I became eligible to go on my first overnight hike. As it turned out, my first experience

without dad to prepare my way was the annual "snow hike." I remember it like it was yesterday.

In Phoenix – or the Valley of the Sun – snow is a big deal. They don't get snow there. The mountains that form the valley aren't quite high enough to attract measurable snow. So when the scout master said, "snow hike" I got fired up. I was ready to face Mother Nature head on – or so I thought. Never in my life has excitement and enthusiasm turned to dread and despair so fast. Please pray with me.

And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, the One who calls to us from out of the wilderness places of our lives. Open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and the word proclaimed so that we too might prepare your way – the way of the kingdom made real in the word become flesh at Christmas. In the name of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Luke's account of Jesus' ministry begins with the work of John the Baptist as he prepares the way of the Lord. John could have been the first Boy Scout as he proclaims this ministry of preparedness. He understands that the wilderness journey must begin with preparation. To step out on such a journey unprepared is to invite despair, welcome failure, and even death. John plays an important role in God's plan for

shaping the ministry of Jesus. Working through other prophets as well as John, God intends to leave nothing to chance. God always has a plan.

Two of the worst days of my life were framed by that snow hike because I was not prepared. Still, after all these years, I have this kind of Shirley McLain-like “out-of-body” experience. I look down and I see that pitiful ten year-old boy sitting in a snow bank, soaked and chilled to the bone, with wet matches and damp wood, and a raw hamburger patty in an old army mess kit.

You know, I didn’t even have gloves to warm my hands. The one pair I did bring burst into flames the evening before as they lay “drying” by the fire. I was miserable. Fortunately, it’s hard to starve a healthy ten year-old boy to death in thirty-six hours.

I sat there, shivering and hungry in the cold, wet snow as the tears welled up. Then, out of my despair an inner consciousness awoke in me. Like a voice crying out in the wilderness – it spoke to me, saying: “Don’t you ever get caught unprepared again, anywhere, any place, any time, for any reason – ever again!” And I took the voice of my conscience seriously! It’s important to have a plan.

God had a plan for John. In the gospel lesson this morning, Luke emphasizes three important aspects of that plan to make sure that the way was prepared for Jesus to begin his ministry. First of all, John had to be a prophet – a contemporary prophet. He not only echoes the word of God spoken through Isaiah in the past, he also holds a vision of a society redeemed and renewed by God’s love made real in Christ in the future. John inherits this call honestly as Luke explains, “... the word of God came to John in the wilderness.” This

establishes John’s call to a prophetic ministry and fixes his appointment as a visionary for a wilderness people.

Secondly, John had to be a preacher. He comes proclaiming a “... baptism of repentance ...” as he is inspired by this plan of God’s to prepare the way for Jesus. John preaches the need for an ethical and moral renewal among the people of Israel. It’s a call to return to holy living in the spirit of the old covenant, even in the face of the coming of a new covenant. The baptism that is offered by John is not just a water ritual of cleansing based on the ancient laws of Leviticus. It’s not about “clean and unclean.” To be baptized by John implies that there must be a change in behavior, in lifestyle – a desire to return to holy living. For this reason, baptism by John without repentance is not effective. It doesn’t mean anything!

And in the third place, John had to be an evangelist. His ministry of preparation – his role as the first Boy Scout – is the beginning of the fulfillment of God’s plan to extend salvation to all the world. God’s redemptive love isn’t just for Israel, but for all God’s children. “Prepare the way of the Lord ... and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

So John prepares for the coming of the Lord by serving a prophetic ministry of preaching and evangelism – extending God’s love beyond the Hebrews, beyond the boundaries defined by first century Judaism. During this time of Advent – how should we prepare for the coming of the Lord?

We only have eighteen days, less than three weeks. Like last year and the year before that and the year before that most of us will get caught up in the secular celebration. We will decorate trees in our homes, put up outdoor lights and displays, address Christmas cards

and get them in the mail. Then there's shopping to be done for friends and family and the baking and candy making, and those office parties to attend. That's a lot of stuff to pack into eighteen days.

Now don't take offense. There's nothing wrong with these secular holiday activities. I don't mean to scold you for getting into the Christmas spirit. Christmas spirit is good. But once into the spirit, we need to keep our perspective.

On the one hand, think about how much time we spend preparing for these activities. If we spend so much time on the secular stuff that we forget the real reason for the season, we lose that perspective. So on the other hand, we need to set aside time to prepare to receive God's love made real at Christmas. Remember – John was the first Boy Scout, not the last Boy Scout.

He didn't finish God's redemptive work in the world and neither did Jesus. The ministry of preparation that was begun by John and passed on to Jesus must continue today. And we are the ones to continue it! We are it! During this time of Advent we are called to John's ministry of preparation. As the first Boy Scout, he was a forerunner, announcing the great things of the kingdom that are yet to come. In this way, John is a model for the church today – a model for us. The good news of the gospel message is not only that which God has done through Christ Jesus, but also what God is still doing through the Risen Christ and our need to continue John's work to prepare the way for the kingdom that is still coming.

What to do, what are we to do! It's one of those "you" things. It's personal and individual. John calls for an ethical and moral renewal – and a

return to holy living to prepare for the kingdom. What should we do? Why not just embrace those three aspects of John's ministry.

First, the prophetic piece. Envision a future society redeemed and renewed by God's love alone. This happens when we become aware of social justice issues and strive for peace in all that we do.

Repentance, you will recall, is that second piece. This one is harder than it might sound. Eliminate distractions in your life. Get rid of those things or habits that tend to move you further away from God or even separate you from God. A return to holy living means moving closer to God by getting rid of obstacles.

Finally, number three is evangelism. Evangelism happens when we share the love of Christ with someone. When we let them know that God's love – God's saving grace – is extended to everyone. In simple terms, we become evangelists when we go out of our way to share our witness with the world – to share with others your own personal experience of God with others who need to hear about God's love for that world.

To finish up here let me say a word about that ten year-old scout we left back in that snow bank. My conscious prompted me to "never again get caught unprepared" and that has stayed with me all these many years. The snow hike experience served me well. I went on to become an Eagle Scout. I consider this to be among the most significant accomplishments of my life. It has been foundational for my future. It prepared me for life for vocation and for ministry.

John, as the first Boy Scout, would agree, I believe, that whatever we

do in life is worthy of our thoughtful attention – that is preparation. In less than three weeks, we will once again celebrate God's love made real in the world through the birth of the Christ child. This is surely an event that is worthy of our thoughtful preparation.

How will you prepare to receive Christ, God's love made real at Christmas?