

SERMON NOTES — December 8, 2024

Theme from today's readings: Prepare the way of the Lord

Questions: What does it mean to 'prepare the way of the Lord'? Prepare how? What is the *Way* of the Lord?

To begin to answer these questions, I offer words from today's Psalm (which we didn't read together). This is one that doesn't come from the Book of Psalms but from Luke 1:68-79. It is the song that Zechariah sings at the birth of his son, John the Baptist. I (Pastor Paul) will sing a portion that I sang for my oldest son's baptism; it's from the Green Hymnal:

You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
to give his people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.
In the tender compassion of our God,
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.
(*Lutheran Book of Worship*, p. 135)

In our baptisms, we are all called to the way of peace, following Zechariah's hopes for his son John the Baptist. It is no less urgent today than in the First Century, since we face our own version of Nationalism. Back then, there was the nationalism of the Roman Empire, which many Jews hoped to counter with their version of Jewish Nationalism. Today, we have fellow citizens who are promoting "Christian Nationalism," the belief that Christians should rule over our nation, using force if need be.

All versions of nationalism have those two major features in common:

(1) Our group, or nation, is in the right, and so the gods install us to rule over all others; and (2) the fundamental belief in the use of political violence to carry it out.

Our revitalization of the Gospel opposes both of these tenets. Jesus came to launch God's way of reigning in the world whose fundamental belief is in the power of love, not the power of violence. The most crucial revelation through Jesus Christ is that God is completely

nonviolent. We came to this highpoint especially two weeks ago, on Reign of Christ Sunday (Nov 24), when we read about Jesus standing before Pilate, saying, "My kingdom isn't the sort that grows in this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my supporters would have fought to stop me being handed over to the Judeans." Instead of fighting, of inflicting violence on others, Jesus suffers our typical political violence on the cross. Easter reveals Jesus' way as the way that leads to life.

Today's readings about the way of the Lord reveal the error of the other tenet that thinks the gods install some people to be in charge over others. The images of leveling from Isaiah 40 (e.g., valleys filled and mountains lowered) is a metaphor for seeking true equity in human relations — for example, in Mary's Song in two weeks (Advent 4C), where the mighty are brought low and the lowly exalted. The American experiment with democracy represents a seeking to find such true equity. Christian Nationalism seeks to roll things back to the age-old ways on inequality. You and I, in the months ahead, are called to prepare the way of the Lord, which is decidedly not the way of Christian Nationalism.

Bonus material not in the sermon, where I reference the fact that Christian Nationalists straightforwardly tell us what they want to do. Here I offer details. I agree with those who name **Paul Weyrich** (1942-2008) — born and raised in Racine! — as the central architect of modern Christian Nationalism. He founded:

- The Heritage Foundation (with Joseph Coors) in 1971, the organization whose three nominees for the Supreme Court were acted on by President Trump; and the group responsible for writing and promoting *Project 2025*.
- The Moral Majority (with Jerry Falwell) in 1979, the major political action group working to coalesce Christian evangelicals into the movement of Christian Nationalism.

Quotes from Paul Weyrich:

- From his 2009 book *The Next Conservatism*: "we should be fighting to return to family structures of the 1950s."
- "The question is not whether we should fight, but how. . . . In essence, I said that we need to change our strategy. Instead of relying on politics to retake the culturally and morally decadent institutions of contemporary America, I said that we should separate from those institutions and build our own." (I.e., *Project 2025* now seeking to remake American institutions)

