

Someone jokingly said, "If we are not careful, John the Baptist
can take all of the fun out of Christmas.

That came to my mind when I first looked at this reading again.
Are we really in bad enough shape to need to listen to his warning?

"Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Then, the other part:

"Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."

What I think it means is that it takes doing one before the other.

We cannot make a pathway, clear a pathway
unless we have let go of some other things.

It is a decision we make – letting go, turning away from the past.

It is a little like the Shel Silverstein poem.

Anyone read Shel Silverstein? Can you guess the poem I am thinking of?

Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out

Let me share it with you, and let's see if it helps us hear John's message.

Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout

Would not take the garbage out!

She'd scour the pots and scrape the pans,

Candy the yams and spice the hams,

And though her Daddy would scream and shout

She simply would not take the garbage out.

And so it piled up to the ceilings:

Coffee grounds, potato peelings,

Brown bananas, rotten peas,

Chunks of sour cottage cheese.

It filled the can, it covered the floor,

It cracked the window and blocked the door

With bacon rinds and chicken bones,

Drippy ends of ice cream cones,

Prune pits, peach pits, orange peel,

Gloppy glumps of cold oatmeal,

Pizza Crusts and withered greens,

Soggy beans and tangerines,

Crusts of black burned buttered toast,
Gristly bits of beefy roasts...

The garbage can rolled on down the hall,
It raised the roof, it broke the wall...
Greasy napkins, cookie crumbs, globs of gooey bubble gum,
Cellophane from green baloney,
Rubbery blubbery macaroni,
Peanut butter, caked and dry,
Curdled milk and crusts of pie,
Moldy melons, dried up mustard,
Eggshells mixed with lemon custard,
Cold French fries and rancid meat,
Yellow lumps of cream of wheat.

At last the garbage reached so high
That finally it touched the sky.
And all the neighbors moved away,
And none of her friends would come to play.
And finally Sarah Cynthia Stout
Said, "OK, I'll take the garbage out!"

But then, or course, it was too late...
The garbage reached across the state,
From New York to the Golden Gate.
And there, in the garbage she did hate,
Poor Sarah met an awful fate,
That I cannot right now relate
Because the hour is too late.
But children, remember Sarah Stout
And always take the garbage out!

We are all a little like Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout.

We have not taken our garbage out.
We keep doing things that separate us from the vital life-giving forgiveness
that awaits us on the other side of John's message -
the other side of taking our garbage out.

That is what repentance is all about.
But, it's about as inviting at first - as John is -
thundering out of the wilderness -
looking so un-kept, so extreme, so downright scary.

But, Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout, I can listen to her tale
and consider that quite possibly,
I could have some garbage,
that could look as badly – and stink as strongly – and be as offensive
to my creator – to God -
as the rubbery blubbery macaroni, curdled milk and crusts of pie, moldy melons,
dried up mustard, eggshells mixed with lemon custard -
sounds to you and me.

Seriously, John is saying something important to us.
That is, if we want to create a space for this new thing God wants to do in the world
right here with us
it's time to let go of some old things that stand in the way.

What might those things be that stand in the way?
One might be assumptions about what life was to be like – remember?
And another might be cynicism, guilt, experience of disappointment,
fear of appearing too optimistic.
Or, I have always done it this way or that.
You name it,
what gets in your way of letting go of the past?

John is coming to us with two messages:

The first is to let go of the past, and the limitations we set for ourselves
because we think it is just that way.

The second is to make a pathway for the new – to create new space.

The second is what we want to get to.

John wants us to clear a place for what God wants to do in this world.

And, what does God want to do?

God wants to set us free.

We learned that from the Old and New Testaments.

"I have observed the misery of my people...I have heard their cry.
Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them."

God came to set the Hebrews free from slavery in Egypt:

One of the first things we learned about Jesus
was that he was sent to deliver his people – to set them free.

For thousands of years oppressed peoples have found hope
in this story and looked to God for deliverance.

The civil rights movement in the United States began in the churches.
Black South Africans, segregated and oppressed by the apartheid government,
were freed because leaders like Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu
appealed to the conscience of the rest of the world.

"Prepare a way for the Lord – make straight the path."

The church had a big role in bringing down the Soviet Empire.

There is certainly the Roman Catholic influence
in destroying the communist hold on Poland,
and less well-known acts of courage

by churches in other countries - making space for others to be free.

The Berlin Wall came down in some measure because the churches in East Germany
continued to do what the church always does –
they cared for the weak in their society -

gathered people to hear the gospel of freedom and hope
preached from the pulpits and acted out in the lives of individuals.

Remember the candlelight prayer vigils in the shadow of the Berlin wall?

They were making a space for people to be free.

And people are still looking to be free - and still being set free.

But the paths need straightening –
the spaces still need to be made and maintained.

What if we let the light of our Advent candles shine into the shadows of this world?

“Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.”

Think of the places where space needs to be made

and paths need to be straightened -

Darfur, Sudan, Iraq, Indonesia, can you name them?

some thirty odd places in this world in dire need of freedom from oppression.

Many of those places are where volunteers and others

are doing amazing things with those pathways -

pathways that lead to freedom.

John comes out of the wilderness in this wild world – here in 2007

asking us to make a space in our lives for the same work.

David Bornstein wrote a book called How to Change the World:

Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas.

He writes an article in this month's issue of World Ark,

a publication from Heifer International.

He tells story after story of people who have

departed from the conventional pathways of success.

They have done it to devote themselves to solving social problems.

He writes about individuals who have moved into a path of action

that aligns their interests, talents and values -

and also contributes to the well-being of others?¹
His article is one about “pursuing happiness” – of all things.

One of the people he wrote about, Michael Lerner,
recalled a profound turning point in his life,
when he quit his tenured track at Yale University
because he wanted to explore how nutrition
could relate to behavioral disorders in children.

And that set him on a path of discovery he said he could not have imagined.

He has since collaborated
in building an international health and environmental research institute.

Lerner said this:

“There is this enormous, coherent, indefinable mystery in the world
that we can all connect to and all participate in, if we choose.”

What Bornstein found as he studied people like Michael Lerner,
is that these people connect their needs, their values, and their abilities
with the needs of others.

And in doing that - find deep sources of strength and joy.

But, they had to create the space to do it.

Dr. Rachel Remen, in her book *My Grandfather's Blessings*,
said, “The worst thing in life isn't death. The worst thing in life might be to miss it.”

John does not want us to miss it. He wants us to make the space -
create the paths.

Or perhaps Kierkegaard came close to it by saying:

“There is nothing with which every man is so afraid
as getting to know how enormously much
he is capable of doing and becoming.”

It's all about making spaces for amazing things to happen.

¹ David Bornstein. *WorldArk*. November/December 2007. “Pursuing Happiness”. p. 11

So, when John comes charging out of the wilderness during this
beautiful season of watchfulness and waiting for our Lord,

what if we took him seriously
about making spaces for new things to do in our lives?

And, so I ask, what needs taking out – that you no longer need?
Can you make some new space
so that God can do something new in your life?

Answering this is a part of
letting the season be upon us.