

Matthew 3:1-12

Still preparing the way?

For the final reflection of the year, let's start with some observations ...

- V3 There is the ring of the familiar words of the well-known line from the song '*Prepare ye the way*' (GODSPELL)
- (Another Old Testament prophesy being quoted and fulfilled. From what I can gather, this passage referred to from Isaiah 40, was written around 700 years earlier.)
- V7 What a charming welcome to the people presenting themselves for baptism ... '*you bunch of snakes!*'
- V9 John reminds the people just because they have some royal religious heritage, don't think you are OK
- V11 The comments on baptism are interesting if not a bit mysterious
- V12 The agricultural metaphor of the threshing floor, harvesting and separating the wheat from the chaff would be lost on many people these days!

As we close out the second decade in the first century of the third millennium, how does this Gospel passage inform the shaping and operation of our Lutheran schools in the 2020s and beyond?

Clearly the theme of *preparing the way* features in this passage, but I am in two minds about what that is saying to us. On the one hand there is so much of the past in this reading, that it reminded me of the importance of really valuing our roots (our heritage), staying true to who we are and our charter as schools of the Lutheran church. Are we being reminded to stick to the original script with regard to why we have been established? As we navigate through the complexities of the educational environment in the 21st century, I think there is still a sense in which '*prepare the way*' applies ...we have a job to do in preparing a fertile field in which to plant the seed for the good news of Jesus to germinate and flourish within our staff, our students and our families.

On the other hand ...

While there is a sense in which we are the John the Baptists of this era, who are crying out in the spiritual wilderness in which our schools operate (a society that has in the main chosen to walk away from God), our refrain is nevertheless quite different. Although we have a similar catch-cry of trying to convince people that Jesus is the real deal, it should however ring out with a very different chorus line. The people then, were grappling with the question 'Is this Jesus the real Messiah?' ... we have the significant advantage of seeing "runs on the board" (with the score pasted above the empty cross and tomb.) It can therefore perhaps be argued that **we are no longer preparing the way!** We can proclaim the good news that Jesus, Son of God, **has already come** and is with us now ... no more waiting, it's all a done deal!

One other thought to take with us into the next decade ...

For a completely different thread of thinking, I would like to focus on the wording of verse 12.

"His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

I don't want attempt an analysis of the intent of this verse, but rather pick up the point of **being relevant** with our imagery as we spread the Word in our school communities. Just for the record, the term winnowing refers to the process of separating the outer husk of the wheat head from the grain itself. It is possible to simulate this process on a small scale, by grabbing a few heads of ripe wheat, rubbing your cupped hands together, then opening up and blowing hard over your hands. All of the lighter chaff will be blown away and the heavier valuable wheat grains will remain behind. My point is this ... it is a reminder for us to be careful in planning how we communicate to young people and families. We must use language that connects. Much of the (early) agricultural imagery used by Jesus is irrelevant to the target audiences of Lutheran schools. What are some good modern-day metaphors? Most adults would understand extracting coffee from coffee beans and throwing out the coffee grounds, or consuming a packet of Tim Tams and of course consigning the packaging to landfill!

Just maybe, God is speaking to us through this passage, to remind us not only to prepare the way, but to communicate our message to those in our community in a lingo that is going to make sense!