



# Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins  
Rector

## PREPARE THE WAY

### Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 6, 2015

*Readings:* Malachi 3:1-4; Canticle 16; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

*Sermon text:* As it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Luke 3:3

#### 1. John the Forerunner

Luke tells us that John, son of the priestly family of Elizabeth and Zechariah, was set aside or dedicated as a child to the service of God. When he became an adult, he probably came under the influence of teachers from the group called the Essenes, who lived in the caves above of the Dead Sea; perhaps he was one for a time. But at some point in his young adulthood Luke tells us (and all the gospels include John the Baptist as a forerunner of Jesus) “he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

This was something new, a twist on the ritual immersion or *mikvah*, required of various types of people before returning to the ordinary course of Jewish life and

Temple observance (for instance if one had touched or handled a corpse or for women after their menstrual period, or those recovered from “unclean” sores and so on).

John was concerned about amending one’s life in preparation for the imminent coming of the Messiah. This is why his baptism is not just part of a return to the normal course of one’s life after one had been rendered unclean by natural circumstance or personal sin. His call is to renounce whatever ethical shortcoming was present in one’s normal life. For instance, he calls upon soldiers to refrain from threats and extortion; for tax collectors to collect only taxes due, not charging extra to enrich themselves. For all people he called upon them to be generous and charitable: to give one’s second coat to someone who has none. This is to realign—to right-wise, make righteous and just—one’s social and religious relationships. And it is an explicit critique on business as usual at the marketplace, government or temple.

No wonder King Herod, at Queen Herodius’ instigation, had him killed. He included his marriage to his brother’s ex-wife as something shameful.