

*I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will make a way a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make the way for the Lord’*

We are called to make a way. For the next few moments we have together, I want you all to reflect on the idea of “we are called to make a way.”

There are certain people whose achievements and contributions to the world give them iconic status. It’s easy to forget that these people were once young, unsure, and in need of guidance and direction – for although they are now role models for many people, they were once protégés themselves.

One such giant we love to celebrate is Nelson Mandela. We tend to emphasize Nelson Mandela’s accomplishments as leader of the African National Congress, freedom fighter, vanquisher of apartheid, Nobel Peace Prize winner, and first president of the new South Africa. But Mandela wasn’t born fully formed. He had to learn and develop like everyone else. The person he acknowledged as his mentor and one who made a way for him was Walter Sisulu.

It was in prison that Mandela gradually emerged from Sisulu’s shadow and took on the leadership role that Sisulu had been preparing him for since their first meeting back in 1941. Sisulu recognized his protégé’s leadership qualities, and was happy to let him take a more senior role.

But even as he was leading a movement and then a nation, Mandela still relied on his old Walter Sisulu who had made a way for him to. While Mr. Mandela was the public face of the African National Congress, by his own account he “rarely acted without first consulting Mr. Sisulu.”

Friends, we are called to make a way. There is always somebody who is called to make a way. And we need to recognize that there are people who have built a tract to the river edge so that we can be where we are now.

There is always someone who comes before us. We have the tendency to lift up and validate some of the great people of history but leave others as footnotes. It is football season and

we all have favorite players. We put on their jerseys and fill up football stadiums because we want to see them play and cheer for them.

Before you all get excited about Cam Newton, Tom Brady and Peyton Manning, you need to know that there was somebody – by the names of Don Hutson, Dick Butkus and Reggie White who made a way for these young players. Before my African American friends all get excited about being able to sit down in a bus, you need to know there was a woman by the name of Rosa Parks who stood her grounds refusing to give up her seat so that we can all sit down today.

Do you know somebody made a way to the rivers' edge for you?

There is always somebody who comes before us and makes a way for us.

In our text for today, there is a gentle man by the name of John, John the Baptist, a power preacher, a unique minister who knows he is called to make a way for somebody else. John knows that his ministry is not about elevating himself but he knows that he is called to design and create a ministry that will make a way for the one who comes after him. John knows that it's not about him, but it's all about Jesus.

John comes in a period of history when the synagogue had been captured by the roman rule. Prior to this period there was the Maccabean revolt that pushed back the Persians who were out to destroy the Hebrew community. Because the Rome did not want another Maccabean revolt, Rome captured and colonized the temple.

John recognizes that Hebrew lives matter and she he starts a decentralized movement. He moves out into the desert to understand and communicate with people about this new decentralized movement. John recognizes that it's not about him, but it's about the next generation. And if we are called by God, we must recognize that when we do things for God, we are stage hands in a divine drama. And any person who has been a stage hand knows you are not supposed to be the star but you are supposed to make sure the light is shining on the star.

John has an assignment in the desert. A desert is a place of low resources, a place that never grows and develops.

Many of us who are here right now, our assignments are not in the city but in the desert. Your assignments are an assignment with low resources, and we must accept our desert assignments. If we are to be who God calls us to be, then we must be willing to accept our desert assignments.

There are deserts in our community from hunger to homelessness to education to mass incarceration, to police brutality. We have been called to these deserts to make a way for those who will come after us. You have to be comfortable where God calls you. John understood this. The text says people came from the city and the country to hear him speak. Sometimes your proclamation would be bigger than your location. When you have a message that God has given you, it will draw people to that particular area.

John's proclamation was so awesome people were coming to hear his powerful prophetic voice. He was bringing together this idea of love and justice. And telling people to repent and offering forgiveness.

So often we have lessened the idea of love and justice and forgiveness. Friends, love without justice is just sentimentality. But when love and justice walk down the aisle and they get married they will have two children one call liberation and the other transformation. And when love and justice comes together something powerful happens in our community.

And here is John in the desert, he doesn't have Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter or anything else. It's just John in the desert. He said "I would let my voice be carried by the wind and people will hear what I have to say." John did not set out with the goal of being different from everyone else; rather he targeted all of his efforts towards obedience.

When we come to realize that God has given us a specific purpose, for our lives, we can move forward with confidence, fully trusting the one who called us. Like John the Baptist, we don't have to fear living with a radical focus on our God-given mission. And we have to know that we have been created uniquely by God and we need to speak this to the next generation.

You need to know that the reason why you sit in these seats today, have the job that you have is because somebody made a way to the river's edge for you for you to be here; and the reason why I stand here (in this place where 100 years ago, it was impossible for women to preach, yet alone a black woman, and even so an African woman) I stand here today because somebody prepared this way for me. There is always somebody who makes a way so others can follow.

Friends we are in a time in history, where our country is in a cross road or you can say we are in the desert. We are confused and filled with uncertainties, but if you can take yourself away from the hassle and buzzle, you will hear a voice calling out for us to prepare a way. Are we going to answer that call or fold our arms and complain?

You see it is not the size of the tree that matters; it is how deep its roots are. My father used to tell me to never climb a tree that has never been in a storm because a tree that has not been in a storm does not have deep enough roots. But if you have been through something, you will find that you have deeper roots and can handle when someone is pulling on your branches. So don't hate on the storm, just go through your storm and say God deepened my roots.

If you asked John the Baptist what were his credentials to do what he was doing, what do you think he would say? The Lord called me 700 years ago and has been making the preparations for this very moment.

Friends, the Lord God Almighty has been preparing you for this very moment for over 2,000 years. God has placed you in this world, your world, and has given you tools to work with, to do the ministry He has called for you to prepare the way.

He has not called you out to fail; He has called you because we are "Being Prepared to Prepare" others to meet Jesus. "He brought you out of the miry clay, and He has set your feet on the rock to stay."

So go to your desert assignment and make a way for somebody.