

Lee C. Moorehead  
1-3-1982Preparing for 1984

When I turned in my material for this Sunday's bulletin Esther Glas wondered if I had made a mistake. The sermon title read: "Preparing for 1984," and she wanted to know if I had not meant "1982." No, I meant it as I wrote it down: 1984. As everyone knows 1984 is the title of one of the most provocative novels written in our lifetime. After World War II George Orwell conceived a world of horrendous characteristics that would mean, under the watchful eye of "Big Brother," the almost complete mechanization and dehumanization of our society. He prophesied that this would occur in 1984.

Well, we are not far from 1984 and I propose that on this the first Sunday in 1982 we take a look at what we are doing to prepare for the future.

No matter what happens to us, 1984 is destined to be a very significant year. Besides being the "Orwellian" year, 1984 will be:

- A year of presidential election in the United States
- The meeting of the quadrennial General Conference of the United Methodist Church
- Officially to be celebrated as the 200th anniversary year of Methodism in the United States. The General Conference will be held in Baltimore, Md. where the first General Conference met.
- For me it could have a very personal meaning. In 1984 I could retire from the ministry and go on Social Security. Please don't start looking forward to my retirement now, for I don't have to retire then. Besides, many other things could happen to me.

With all of those events packing meaning into the year 1984, we might also ask: Will 1984 be "the year of our Lord"?

If we have any inclination to prepare for 1984, or 1982, or any future

year, we might very well turn to the beginning in the New Testament. All four Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - tell of John the Baptist who was viewed as the forerunner of Jesus. Each of the four gospels presents different details regarding John's mission. Mark, having no birth narratives regarding Jesus, begins immediately with the mission of John. Mark's opening words are these:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.  
As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,  
"Behold, I send my messenger before thy face,  
who shall prepare thy way;  
the voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight -"

Luke, following his birth narratives, quotes much more extensively from Isaiah:

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.  
Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be brought low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ~~pixxxxx~~ ways shall be made smooth;  
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."  
(Luke 3:4-6, RSV)

As we begin this new year, is that not our role as Christians, to prepare the way of the Lord? No matter what this year 1982, or the impact year of 1984 might bring, are we not called to be his voices and messengers?

Even in our personal lives, is it not imperative that we make some preparations for the coming of Christ? If we are to have any kind of meaningful Christian witness in these years that lie ahead - they are crucial years - shall it not be expected of us that we will right now be in the acts of preparing the way?

Halford Luccock who had a deep influence on me in the early days of my ministry has written most strikingly about the role of those who would prepare the way. Commenting on Mark's opening statements about John the Baptist he writes:

Every fresh coming of Christ in the world has followed the work of those who in their spirit and in their lives have been road makers. There is a fine old word in English which expresses the role perfectly - "pavior." A pavior was one who paved a road, who "prepared the way" and made ~~xxxxright~~ "paths straight." The world



needs a Savior - it also needs paviors.

.. We prepare the way of Christ when we give him a leverage in our life. A receptive mind is an indispensable road-making tool. We prepare his way when we become a crying voice. In the beginning is the word - always. We make his paths straight when we bring his creative word to a world dying for lack of it. We go before his face and make ready for him when we help to remove the things which block his entrance into our world - ancestral blindness, sanctified stupidit~~ess~~, greed, pride, hatred.

(Interpreter's Bible, V. 7 (Matt. and Mark, p. 649)

As we look at what is happening in our world, preparing for 1984, or for 1982, may seem like being given the role of "a voice crying in the wilderness." We may be like the description given to John - a voice crying in the wilderness. All around us is the wilderness of hatred, war, revenge, injustice, and cruelty. What difference can we make? Never mind what difference! Our calling in Christ is the same as John's: we are to speak out in his holy word, to witness for what we know to be true and just and right. We are not to fear the consequences, we are not to be concerned primarily with our own safety or our own good. We are to "cry out" for his word.

George Orwell in his remarkable novel 1984 may very well have been a voice crying in the wilderness of indifference and contempt. But he cried out, nonetheless. How much more are we as Christians to cry out for Christ! Never mind the wilderness! Walter Russell Bowie commenting on this New Testament passage wrote:

Nevertheless .. (this voice) can help to fill up the valleys of ignorance, to bring down the mountains and hills of stubborn prejudice and pride, to straighten men's crooked thinking, to smooth the rough ground of instinctive resistance which human nature interposes between the feet of God.

(Interpreter's Bible, V.8, Luke and John, p. 72)

Indeed, we can see the prints of "the feet of God" in our world, and we can discern the "instinctive resistance which human nature interposes." It is our calling not to let 1984 happen as ~~R~~ Orwell feared. It is our calling to run between the feet of God and smooth out those rough places, to fill up the valleys, to bring down the mountains and the hills.

This same truth falls heavily upon every one of us, personally. No one knows what 1982, or 1984, holds for him or her. But we have a great deal

of changing to do, to get our lives turned around, turned away from the sins that are killing us, and get our feet set on the way of preparing for the Lord. A recent film has engendered much discussion. "Prince of the City" is all about corruption in the great city, and about one cop in particular who has been on the take, but who makes a decision to go straight. Yet he is plagued by his past deeds and acquaintances, his informers and his enemies. At one point in the film one of the more sympathetic prosecutors says of his (Ciello's) case: "A cop becomes corrupt a little bit at a time, but getting back has to be done in one big, dangerous leap." (Sojourners, Dec. 1981, p.36) "It is the same with all of us. All of us are of the world, very worldly. We become corrupt a little bit at a time. We have fallen in love with worldly pleasures and commitments, while at the same time fretting in our consciences over what is happening to us. Looking toward that momentous year of 1984, and right now of 1982, are we not challenged to get back to Christ? Must it not be done in one big, dangerous leap?

If we are going to be preparers of the way, if we are going to be paviors, straightening and smoothing the way for the Savior of the World, how better could we prepare for that role than by sitting down with Christ at his table. Think today, if you will, of this divine supper, as a hearty meal of which you partake just before you go out on the highway. At this table you will fellowship with him, and you will be given the gifts of courage and strength and grace and hope. "You who do truly and earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near with faith, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort, and make your humble confession to almighty God."

If that is your intention, this meal will enable you to walk into the future unafraid - neither 1982 or 1984 will intimidate you and you will be one to whom it is given to "Prepare the way of the Lord."