

PREPARE THE WAY

Our text is the Gospel Lesson for the Second Sunday in Advent, Luke 3:1-6. We listen again to verse 4 (the writer Luke is quoting from Isaiah 40):

‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him...’

Dear Friends in Christ,

This is the first Sunday in the month of December, and as you all know, December is a very different month in our society. It is dramatically different from the other eleven months. It is different because December is a month of preparation. As dad climbs up and down the ladder, hanging the festive lights on the saguaro cactus in the front yard, he’s preparing. As mom pushes the over-laden shopping cart to the check-out lane, she’s preparing. As people young and old hit the shopping malls with a high level of intensity and aggressiveness, they’re preparing. As houses become filled with the smell of cookies, and radio stations change their programming to include old, nostalgic songs about chestnuts and a winter wonderland, people are preparing, because soon, it will be Christmas time.

December is a month of preparation. In the church year, we are also in a season of preparation called “Advent.” Advent is that time of the year when we prepare for the coming of Christ. We prepare to celebrate his first arrival, his humble, quiet birth in Bethlehem. But we’re also preparing for his second coming, when Christ will come in all his majesty, with the loud, trumpet call of God on Judgment Day.

The season of Advent runs for four weeks, the four weeks just before Christmas. Just as you do all kinds of physical things to prepare for Christmas, you can also do spiritual things to prepare yourself for Christ’s coming. It’s easy to prepare for the holiday of Christmas, just look at what all the other people are doing and do the same. But how do you prepare spiritually? How do you prepare spiritually for Christ’s coming? It’s a mystery for most people. Many people at this time of the year can say, “I’m ready for Christmas! But ready for Christ, how do you do that?”

There is someone who teaches you how to do this, and he appears every December. No, it’s not Frosty the Snowman or Rudolph or Santa, it’s John the Baptist. Just so you don’t get the idea that he had a denominational preference, we also refer to him as John the Baptizer. John the Baptist, John the Baptizer, same person. But the point is John was a real person who really lived a long time ago. In fact we can almost pinpoint exactly when John lived and preached.

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracoonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,

That would be right around the years 27 A.D. and 28 A.D. And here’s the importance of that fact. God’s saving action in Jesus Christ which John the Baptist was preaching about wasn’t just a matter of ideas, theories or words. It involved concrete events that are a part of human history.

By divine inspiration, the Gospel writer Luke has recorded for us an account of the life and ministry of Jesus, the miracles, the parables and the teachings of Jesus. This is not just a human interest story, but an

account of God working out his plan for your salvation in the person of his son Jesus. These events are part of history. They actually occurred here on earth, and the part that involved John the Baptizer happened in 27 and 28 A.D., 1,981 years ago.

You see, Advent is not a time just to be entertained by the spirit and traditions of Christmas. Advent is the time for you to prepare for the coming of the one whose life and death made you, a sinner from birth, someone who is at peace with God. Today we Prepare the Way...Prepare the Way for Our Savior. John the Baptist helps you prepare.

John was the “voice in the wilderness.” As foretold by the prophet Isaiah, the voice came preaching and baptizing...not in the religious center of Jerusalem, but in the rugged desert terrain around the Jordan River.

² ...the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. ³ He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And the people went out to him in droves. He preached far away from the distractions of the cities and towns. He led a bare existence. He preached about the bare essentials, the bottom line, the greatest need. His message was simple. Prepare! Prepare for the Messiah. Prepare for the kingdom of God. Prepare with sincere repentance. John preached a baptism of repentance.

This wasn't John's idea. This was John's destiny. This was God's purpose for John's life. 700 years before John began his ministry he was the subject of prophecy. Verse 4:

“As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: A voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord.”

John had been called by God to prepare people for the arrival of the Messiah. Jesus Christ was about to start his public ministry, and John was preparing the people, getting them ready. John was the forerunner of the Messiah.

In ancient times whenever a monarch would travel, messengers would be sent ahead to every town and village along the way to tell the people the king is coming, so they could prepare to greet him as he passed through. Large groups of people went ahead of the monarch to prepare the roadway so the ruler could travel without interruption, without obstacles, without delays. The picture we paint this Advent season is the same. We want to remove obstacles, detours, distractions from our lives to prepare our hearts to welcome the newborn king. John the Baptizer got the people prepared. He did that by teaching the people to repent.

Do you know what it means to “repent”? To “repent” means to have a change of mind and heart. It means to change direction, to make a U-turn. John was telling the people to change the direction of their lives. They were going one way, unprepared for Christ. John told them to turn their lives around and go the other way.

Repentance is the way you can prepare for Christ too. Repent. Now I know I'm talking to a church full of sanctified believers, people who live in a state of grace, a state of forgiveness. But you and I are not immune to the need to repent. Why is repentance a good way for you to prepare for Christ's coming? Repentance brings about change, even in life-long believers. Repentance makes you stop and think about the things you do, the things you say, the things you think every day which are violations of God's Law and a trampling of his Will. Repentance is your chance to get those things out of your life in preparation for Christ's coming.

Think of repentance this way. First you identify, and then, you do the opposite. First, you identify what is sinful in your life. This is going to take some quiet time on your part. Turn off the TV. Turn off the radio in your car. Shut down the internet. Take a break from shopping and decorating. And just sit, and think, and identify the weaknesses in your life. What is your special weakness, your pet sin?

Is it a dependence, a trust in money instead of God? Is it pride or selfishness which puts yourself and your own interests ahead of God's? Is it worry or doubt that keeps you a prisoner in your mind? Is it stinginess with the material wealth which with God has blessed you...giving as little as possible to the church, to the needy and keeping as much as possible for yourself? Is it anger, hatred, hurt feelings which consume you and keep Jesus at arm's length? Are you materialistic? Do you need to be surrounded by a surplus of things? Are you selfish? Do you have impure, immoral thoughts? Are you impatient with others? Are you a gossip? Do you say things about other people that you really shouldn't say? What are your sins? Identify them. This is the first part of repentance.

After you identify your sins, take them to Christ. Take them to the foot of the cross. Confess your shortcomings to Christ. And then rejoice, because he says, "I forgive you. I died on the cross for all those faults you have. I was punished for your weaknesses. I forgive you."

And then after you have identified your sins and taken them to Christ, the second part is to do the opposite. We call this the "fruits of repentance." Instead of being materialistic, be spiritual. Instead of being selfish, be generous. Instead of being immoral, strive to be pure in your mind. Do the opposite. Change direction in your life. Make a U-turn. That's repentance. And repentance, true repentance, is easier said than done.

Repentance is possible, but not without the most important thing. Without this, you'll never successfully accomplish spiritual change in your life. You'll try, and maybe you'll be successful for awhile. But without the most important thing, you'll eventually fall back into your old ways, just like someone on a crash diet who eventually gains all the weight back.

The power to change and the desire to change come from God himself. What God asks you to do, he also enables you to do through the power of the Holy Spirit. Maybe you've never thought about this before, but Christianity is a religion of change. That's right, I said Christianity is a religion of change. Now your reaction is probably this, "We're Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, we never change nothin'." But change is what Christianity is all about.

There is the first change, that big change, when the Holy Spirit took you from the realm of darkness and unbelief and brought you into the family of believers. For most of us here, that happened in the waters of baptism. But the change from unbeliever to believer is not the only change available. The Holy Spirit can and will work in you to strengthen your faith. He strengthens your faith through the Gospel in God's Word and in the Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. As you grow in your faith you will find that you desire more and more to do God's will. As you grow in your faith you will find that you have the strength to do God's will. We call this growth in faith "sanctification." And sanctification is an on-going process, a process of growth, a process of change.

As your faith grows, as your faith strengthens, true repentance, true change is possible. Maybe you're thinking, "I can't do it. I can't stop this pet sin. It's a habit. It's an addiction. God made me this way. I know it's wrong but I don't want to change. I just can't change." But Christ's love compels you to change. Christ's love motivates you to live for him. Philippians 4:13, *I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*

If you want to stop being so materialistic, and instead, be more spiritual, if you want to stop being selfish, and instead, be generous, if you want to stop having immoral thoughts, and instead, be pure, if you want to be more loving, more patient, more kind, the Holy Spirit will strengthen you through God's Word and through the sacraments. That's how to change. That's how to prepare for Christ. That's repentance.

Prepare the way. Prepare through repentance. Prepare to welcome Christ into your heart this Christmas Season. Prepare to receive him, when he comes again in all his glory at the end of time. If you listen closely, over the songs about Rudolph and Frosty and Santa, if you listen closely, you will hear a voice, a voice of one calling in the desert, "Prepare the way for the Lord." That is the message of Advent. Repent.

Change the direction of your life. Let him prepare you for the day you see him, not in a card, or a manger scene. Let Christ prepare you for the day you will see him face to face. Amen.