

Sermon for December 8, 2024 – Advent 2

Luke 3:1-6 (EHV)

Theme: **How to prepare for Christ's coming:**

- 1) Tune out the world.
- 2) Tune into God's Word and Sacraments for repentance.

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene—² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. ³ He went into the whole region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ Just as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: A voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight. ⁵ Every valley will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be made low. The crooked will become straight, and the rough ways smooth. ⁶ And everyone will see the salvation of God."

If you are planning to have guests over for Christmas, you'll probably want to clean your house before they arrive. Why? To honour your guests by making them feel comfortable and welcome.

But cleaning can be stressful, especially if distractions prevent you from getting started. Then, there are those trouble spots that you struggle to clean. You might try to cover them up or come up with excuses in case your guests see them. However, if those trouble spots are particularly embarrassing, you might even consider cancelling your plans out of shame about what people might think.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, an extraordinary guest intends to visit you this Christmas season: a person so special that you will want to honour Him with your best. Who is it? It's Jesus who wants to make your heart His home. But how can you prepare for His coming? I mean, if you are honest with yourself, you must admit that your heart is a mess: full of selfishness, lust, suspicion, discontent, anger, and other sins. Worse yet, we can't just sweep these things under the rug. How can we prepare to meet Him, who is holiness personified, when we are so unclean? With the example of John the Baptist as our guide, let us learn **How to prepare for Christ's coming:** 1) Tune out the world. 2) Tune into God's Word and Sacraments for repentance.

Part One: Tune out the world.

Our sermon text is from the third chapter of Luke's Gospel. In the previous two chapters, Luke spoke about the births of Jesus and John the Baptist (the person God chose to prepare His people to receive Christ in faith). Almost 30 years had passed since their births, and the time had come for them to start their respective ministries. We read:

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene—² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

By including details about these political and religious leaders, Luke not only indicates when John the Baptist began his ministry as the forerunner of the Messiah, but also summarizes the political and religious landscape of the time.

Luke could have shared a lot of interesting information about these men, especially since Jesus would have to deal with many of them during His ministry. The politics of that time made a fascinating story, like how Rome split Herod's kingdom into four parts - making Pilate governor over one of them. Then, there was the "two high priests" situation, which was a result of Rome meddling with the Jewish religious system. If today's media were covering that time and place, they would focus their attention on all these important political movers and shakers. Luke, however, does not. Instead, he turns his attention to the unknown "*John, the son of Zechariah,*" to whom the word of God came in the wilderness.

Why did I bring this minor detail to your attention? Because most of the worldly things we worry about – like politics and the economy – are not truly important. Worse yet, focusing on these things can hinder our preparations to receive Christ. How so? They consume our time and mental energy and fill us with worry. They lead us to seek answers from the world rather than from God's Word. In summary, they prevent us from hearing God's voice, which calls us to a place free from distractions, where we can listen to His messengers tell us about His salvation.

Do you want peace for your soul during these trying and turbulent times? You will not find it by reading news reports and worrying about worldly matters. Nor will you find it in the world's religious scene, which, like that of Judaism in Jesus' day, often does more harm than good to God's people. Where, then, can you find rest for your weary soul? Only in Christ, who comes to you through His Gospel. Prepare your hearts to receive Him. How? First, tune out the world, and then tune into God's Word and Sacraments.

Part Two: Tune into God's Word and Sacraments

Our sermon text continues: ³ *He [John] went into the whole region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* ⁴ *Just as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: A voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight".*

John the Baptist was the Lord's chosen forerunner. His whole life's purpose was to prepare God's people for the coming of Christ. How did John fulfill his ministry? By *preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

To the Jews of Jesus' day, to "baptize" meant to wash something so that it would be ceremonially clean. They typically baptized objects (like kettles, couches, and pitchers) rather than people. Why not people? Because, as one commentator put it:

*"Baptism was a humiliating rite for the Jews. It represented a complete purification... which implied in him who accepted it not a few isolated faults so much as a radical defilement."*ⁱ

But that is precisely the point God wants us to understand about ourselves: our sins have so radically defiled us in His sight that even *all our righteous acts are like a filthy cloth.*ⁱⁱ God's Word says this about humanity:

*There is no one who is righteous, not even one.
There is no one who understands. There is no one who searches for God.
They all turned away; together they became useless.
There is no one who does what is good; there is not even one...
The way of peace they did not know.
There is no fear of God in front of their eyes.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Every human needs God's soul-purifying washing offered in Baptism. Mountains of guilt and valleys of shame separate us from God. Sin has made a mess out of our human nature. Is it any wonder that Adam hid from God after he ate the forbidden fruit? And doesn't the shame of our sins make us want to hide from God out of fear of His anger?

But the Lord doesn't want us to be separated from Him. That is why He took on human flesh and blood in the person of Jesus: to save us from our sins. Whether we like it or not, our God is coming to us. The question is whether we will receive Him in childlike faith or run away as rebels.

How can we receive Him when we are so dirty? How can we remove the mountains of guilt and fill in the valleys of shame that separate us from Him? The answer is: we can't. But God can.

Look carefully at John the Baptist's preaching: he is not calling *you* to make a clear path for God. All the verbs are passive, indicating that these things will be done for you.

*⁵ Every valley **will be** filled, and every mountain and hill **will be** made low. The crooked **will become** straight, and the rough ways smooth. ⁶ And everyone will see the salvation of God.*

Who, then, is preparing the way in our hearts for Jesus? It is the Holy Spirit working through His Law and Gospel to accomplish these miracles. He is the one who gets us to realize our sins and confess them with genuine remorse. The Holy Spirit then uses the Gospel to point us to Christ and the forgiveness He won for us through His cross. Jesus reconciles us to God. Through His Word and Sacraments, He purifies us from every sin, guilt, and shame so we might live with Him forever in paradise.

Let's return to John the Baptist's ministry. God chose him to prepare His people for the coming Christ by *preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. To grasp what this phrase means, we need to understand repentance properly. Popular belief often limits the word to "feeling sorry for our sins and confessing them to God." While repentance certainly includes this, it means much more.

The biblical term translated as repentance means to turn or to have a change of mind. It not only involves regret and sorrow for disobeying God, but also trusting that God will forgive you, as He promised. In the peace of that promised forgiveness, you now want

to pursue God's good and gracious will out of gratitude rather than return to your previous sins.

Understand this in the context of John the Baptist's preaching. He was not saying, "The Christ is coming, so you better get your act together." No, his message was more like, "Christ is coming. Recognize your sins and turn to Jesus for forgiveness. Then, in the peace of Christ's cleansing, live your life for His glory out of gratitude for His salvation." In summary, John's preaching focused on Christ's works, not yours.

The message John the Baptist preached to prepare the Jews for Christ's coming is the same message God wants His ministers to deliver today: *Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near.*^{iv} Turn to Jesus in faith, and He will forgive you. He has already fully paid for the guilt of your sins through his cross. He washes you clean from all shame and clothes you with His righteousness through baptism. Yes, repent—confess your sins and trust in His forgiving mercy, and the Lord will come to you with His complete salvation.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the Lord wants to meet with you this Christmas season to offer you peace that the world cannot provide. How can you prepare to meet the coming Christ? By tuning out the world and tuning into God's Word and Sacraments. Through these means of grace, the Holy Spirit will cleanse your hearts so much that the LORD Himself will make His home in you. For this reason, let us pray with Luther:

*Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,
Prepare a bed, soft, undefiled
Within my heart, made clean and new,
A quiet chamber kept for you.*

Amen.

ⁱ Frédéric Louis Godet

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 64:6 KJV

ⁱⁱⁱ Roman 3:10-12, 17-18 EHV

^{iv} Matthew 3:2 & 4:17 EHV