

Second Sunday of Advent
December 9, 2018
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Luke 3:1-6 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 Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— **2** during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. **3** He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **4** 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 for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.

5 Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.

6 And all people will see God’s salvation.’”

“Preparations for Peace”

Santa isn’t the only one making lists. Some of us have to make lists of all the lists we need to make. You might even have that mild buzzing feeling in the back of your mind right now. When certain key words trigger thoughts of what you need to do or a moment of silence sends your heart racing and blood pressure rising because you just thought of one more thing you need to do or order or get ready and the window of time is shrinking.

God wants us to be ready for his coming. Luke chapter 3 highlights God’s appointed messenger sent to prepare the way for Jesus. John the Baptist has one mission, one purpose in life. He gets God’s people ready. But John doesn’t want to cause you extra stress. John prepares us to receive God’s gifts. John prepares our hearts for peace.

One of the first things we notice in these verses from Luke chapter 3 is list of rulers and territories and time stamps. John the Baptist was a real person with a real ministry of preparation. This is the exact opposite of the stories that start with a long time ago in a land far, far away. In this case, Luke frames these events in the context of known, historical figures so we can ground our understanding of these events in real places and real times, because they are real historical events. John might be an unusual person with an extraordinary mission, but he came to make a real difference in real lives.

And that difference started with a message. His message would prepare hearts for the coming of God’s promised Savior. Luke summarizes that message as **“a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”** (Luke 3:3) At this point in your life with all the other things you already have to do, this can easily sound like the straw that will break the camel’s back. You simply have no more capacity, no more time, no more energy for even one

more thing to do. John the Baptizer sounds more like a grinch to your Christmas than God's special messenger to help your heart get ready.

Repentance has no room in our world. We don't want to hear about it. We have no time for it. Repentance sounds offensive because it says I am doing something wrong. I am on the wrong path. Repentance has no room for a society that says we can choose our own path and determine our own sense of right and wrong. It's just not a practical way of dealing with all stresses and pressures we deal with on a daily basis. If there is some unknowable powerful being out there who is handing down these imaginary obligations for spiritual improvement, they rank very low on our personal to-do lists. After all, we don't need to offer any explanations for our behavior to anyone. Whatever Christmas is to me is the only thing that matters. Whatever I choose to make of it is the only thing that determines how best I should prepare for it.

In our world we have replaced the edicts and standards of any all-powerful, all-wise God with our own standards. Instead of righteous conduct and holy behavior, we replace it with our own standards of enough-ness. Students feel this when they are trying to position themselves for the next level. It's not enough just to get good grades, because another student's enough is getting good grades plus extra-curricular activities plus community service. It's hard for you to sympathize with people who look like they are just squeaking by at work because your enough is just a little bit more. You are covering for people who are calling in sick. You are working weekends and extra events. Your enough is another level of enough. Parents understand the pressure of enough. One group of parents look down on you if you haven't had all the shots and vaccinations. Another thinks of those kind of medical treatments as almost the same as child abuse. Some say you aren't be a good enough parent if you let your children spend hours on phones and i-pads and television. Some say you have to fill your child's every day with enough activities - sports and art and culture - so they don't get hooked on the evils that come through those screens. Sure, you've taken care of your home and your Christmas decorations and Christmas goodies. But unless you have carefully chosen special gifts for every member of your family and unless you have spent time with the needy and given to every worthy charity, have you really done enough?

So our world has tossed aside the repentance of God's messenger for a secular righteousness that is simply impossible. You simply can't do enough or be enough or measure up enough. And the biggest tragedy to this standard is there is no solution when you realize you haven't done enough.

Actually, that's exactly what makes John the Baptizer's message of preparation such a breath of fresh air. To the canned music of Frosty and Rudolph piped in over shelves of plastic gleaming goods and prizes calling out to be purchased over glowing digital screens, John appears in the wilderness with words of preparation. John comes in fulfillment of important prophecies. Later Jesus specifically identifies God's promises messenger from Malachi as John the Baptizer (Luke 7:27,28). Here in Luke chapter 3 we get a focus on what he does and why: **"Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall**

become straight, the rough ways smooth.” (Luke 3:4,5) John’s proclamation of repentance will have this effect of preparing human hearts.

Every once in a while we hear about super-ambitious plans for a major project. Not like a new pool at Brookside Park. More like the proposals for a railroad link between Albuquerque and Farmington. It’s a great concept. They can even have lots of studies and beautiful pictures. But it just seems a little too ambitious. In Luke chapter three we get pictures of God’s preparation using the harsh geography of Judea. Mountains will need to be leveled. Canyons and ravines will need to be brought up to grade.

But he’s using these pictures for what must happen in your heart and mine. Our mountains of self-righteousness and pride will need to be blasted to bits. Your idea of your enough being more than the person’s enough right next to you, your not-quite-perfect but trying-pretty-hard will need to come toppling down. Your love for your sin that prevents your heart from completely preparing needs to get a bulldozer. Your default of critiquing God’s ways and criticizing God’s will in our world gets smashed. Even Christians who marvel at God’s grace, yet sometimes slide into feeling we are somehow more deserving of God’s grace or more likely to respond to God’s grace than so many of the sinners we see all around us need those hills destroyed.

And then the attention turns to the low and lowly places. Valleys of weakness in faith need to be brought up. Ravines of discouragement need to be lifted. Canyons lacking trust in God’s promises need to come to level places. Even the crooked twisting of God’s Word needs to be made straight. The bumpy ride of ride of respect for God’s ways gets made smooth.

Now, if all of this constructions sounds too difficult, it is. If all this work sounds like too much, that’s exactly the point. You and I aren’t capable of doing this any more than we can make a railroad bed by getting out our garden shovels. We are incapable of making it happen. That’s because God must do this work himself.

But when God’s message takes root in our hearts, some amazing transformations take place. When God’s Word comes to you with the full force of its condemning power, you see the futility to boost your enough-ness by comparing yourself to others. When the message of repentance reaches your ears, you get the full brunt of freight train flattening to your pride somehow thinking you are more deserving of God’s goodness. And when God’s Word removes obstacles of impenitence in your heart, that’s when he does his real work. God is the one preparing a highway suitable for the Messiah, his promised Savior.

Jesus, the promised Savior, comes precisely to deal with brokenness and sin. Jesus came for the hearts that make every excuse not to repent, for all the rebels who cover their ears at the command to repent and try not to hear. Jesus came for every heart that tries to justify their lives and conduct and behavior by attempting to do enough or at least more than someone else’s enough. Jesus came for everyone who looks down on other people who aren’t as worthy as we are but fail to look up to God’s absolute standards of perfection.

Jesus came to deal with your never-enough-ness, your mountain peaks of pride and hills of self-righteousness, your valleys of doubt and your ravines of insecurities. Jesus came to deal with it all himself. Jesus came for you. The portion of Isaiah's prophecy Luke wraps up with says it unmistakably: **"And all people will see God's salvation."** (Luke 3:6) Salvation comes when Jesus comes to deal with your sin and your rebellion. Salvation is yours when Jesus answers your never-enough and your not good enough. Through John's message of preparation, Jesus isn't just some bike path or railroad. Jesus is the hyperloop that comes deliver all his gifts of grace directly to your heart.

This happens. Jesus' coming to you is real. It is a real event in a real place in real time. If you need proof, just go get out your baptismal certificate. John's mission was summarized as a **"preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."** (Luke 3:3) You may have never gone out to the wilderness of Judea or dipped in the waters of the Jordan. But at your Baptism, God gave you his gifts. God gave you his repentance baptism to change your heart. God changed your status by changing you from the inside out. God gifted you with the release from the dungeon of sin and the threat of death.

And John the Baptizer serves as a great example for real gospel messengers today. It's probably no secret that this time of year when we feel extra pressure to be jolly and bright, so many people are struggling. They feel unworthy. They know they haven't done enough. They feel the burden of all the world's not-enough-ness. You can be like John by announcing a rather uncomfortable message that leads to repentance. You can proclaim the release from sin's burden through Jesus. You can share the forgiveness through the Messiah who came for sinners like us. You can announce peace through Jesus.

Somehow God knows exactly what we need to get ready. The prayer of the day is especially meaningful: "Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world." God comes with his power through his message. God comes to prepare the way. God comes to give strength. God comes to give you the gifts only Jesus can give you. And because of that you have peace. Amen.