

Preparing For Christ

Luke 1:11-17

December 1, 2024

Please open your Bibles to Luke 1. Welcome to the first Sunday in Advent. Sat advent. Advent means the coming. As we've said before, the word comes from a Latin word that describes the anticipation and preparation for a visit of the Roman emperor. Months and sometimes even years in advance, the preparations would begin. New roads would be built. Hills would be leveled off and valleys filled in or bridges built so the emperor would have a smooth straight ride. Stadiums and theatres would be constructed or upgraded for the emperor's visit. The program would be carefully planned out with nothing left to chance. It was a very big deal.

The closest thing to that today would be for when a US president visits an area. Crews go in ahead of time to secure everything, or at least they're supposed to. They scope out the place and arrange for lighting, stages, grand entries, and possible emergency exits. Also, each part of the program is scripted and planned with the President obviously having the authority to ad lib and change as needed. Multiply that by a thousand and you get the picture of an advent of a Roman emperor. The anticipation and the preparation were all part of the excitement of his eventual arrival.

So too during our Christmas celebrations, the anticipation and preparation can be part of the excitement. Exhausting but exciting. And while we take great pains to prepare for "The Big Day," what or who are we really celebrating? Are we decorating for own pleasure and enjoyment or for Jesus? On this first day of December and this first day of Advent, I to encourage us to prepare not for Christmas, but for the greatest Emperor of all, Jesus. Yes, He's already come to earth. Yes, He's already been born and even ascended back to heaven. But let's take this advent season to celebrate Him anew. To allow Him to come to us in fresh, new ways that comfort, encourage, bless, and challenge us. And to prepare for His second coming well, Advent 2!

So today, we'll begin to do some of the advance planning. Some of the legwork of preparing. Say Zechariah. That's the name of an OT book, but it's also the name of an elderly priest who was serving in the Temple in Jerusalem about a year before Jesus was born. Perhaps the only time in his whole life he had the privilege of going into the Temple and tending the incense, the showbread, etc. He and his wife Elizabeth were perhaps in their 60s or even 70s and they had never had children even though they had prayed for some many times. While all the worshippers are outside praying, this happens inside. Please stand if you are able. Luke 1:11-17 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will

rejoice because of his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. 16 Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous — to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Say stunned. As Zechariah is going about his God-assigned duties, the angel Gabriel appears to him. Which reminds us that although we may not encounter an angel, God often shows up when we're faithfully serving Him at our job, our home, or our church, so keep on serving. Zechariah is gripped with fear. Like most of us, he's never seen an angel before. But the angel tells him, as the angels said to Mary and to the shepherds and as God says to you and I today, "Do not be afraid." When you're obeying the Lord, you don't have to be afraid. If you're not obeying God, you should be. Gabriel goes on to give Zech the birth announcement for their son. Because Zech questions the angel, he is blessed with a 9 month case of laryngitis until their baby is born.

We've talked before about Zechariah and Elizabeth's joy, but in the baby's birth announcement is also his job description. Did you hear it? Vs 17, He will get people ready for the Lord. Say get ready. Some of his specific duties are also listed but the long and short of it is that their son would be the advance man for the Messiah. And Gabriel saves them a lot of time fretting over what to name their boy. His name shall be John. Say John.

We know him today as John the Baptist. Not the John the Disciple who wrote the Gospel of John, but John the baptizer. Later in this chapter we learn that John's mom and Jesus' mom are relatives which makes Jesus and John cousins. John is also about 6 months older than Jesus. Other than that, we know nothing of John's younger years but he started his job of getting people ready for the Lord some time before Jesus started His ministry. He got a good head start.

So how did he do that? Did he go out and buy a Christmas tree and decorate it? Did he go shopping for everyone on his list capitalizing on the Black Friday deals? Did he start playing Christmas carols? None of the above. Gabriel said he would get people ready by turning. Say turn. He would turn the hearts of the fathers to their children. This phrase is a direct quote from the very last verse of the Old Testament in Malachi 4:6 demonstrating the fulfillment of the prophecy but it also outlines what John was to do and how he was to go about it. Preparing for Jesus would involve a focus on family. It was an emphasis for fathers, parents, grandparents, to love and train their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. To show and teach them what it means to obey God. To not just hope they somehow "catch it" at BLAST, from Sunday school or somewhere else but to intentionally teach by their example and to show them by their relationship. Fathers, mothers, grandparents, turn your hearts toward your

children. Help them not just prepare for Christmas, but as our sermon title says, for Christ. Make sure they know not just the real meaning of Christmas but how to get ready for the advent of the Holy One in the way John the Baptist did, by turning from sin and repenting.

Which is the other major duty under John's job description of bringing people back to God. John was to turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous. To get those who were disobeying God and going in the wrong direction to turn around and obey Him. This is more clearly stated in Luke 3:2. "During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, 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.

Say repent. John preached repentance! He had one sermon, one them, repent! He was a one trick pony. Repentance means to turn from sin. To forsake them, to walk away from them, to stop doing them. We have a lot of people today who claim to follow Jesus, that wear crosses, and even listen to KLOV or other Christian stations that have never repented. We cannot follow Jesus without repenting, without turning from sin. God sent John the Baptist to prepare people to receive the message of grace and forgiveness Jesus would bring. You can't just leapfrog over repentance and expect to be a true Christian. We must repent. Turn from any known sin and ask God to reveal any that we're unaware of and when He does, turn from those as well. Repentance is not a one and done spiritual exercise. Not an "I did that once." No, it is a daily, even moment by moment turning from our sin.

Now there should be a time when we make the first drastic turn when we get saved. We were headed toward hell on the broad 6 lane interstate with most everyone else. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin and when He does, we must confess our sin, agree with God that we have done and are doing wrong, and then cut through the median to cross over onto the narrow one lane, one way road that leads to heaven. It's a 180 degree turn around. We're no longer living for self, for fun, for money, even for others. We're living for Emperor Jesus. But after getting on that narrow road, we've got to keep turning away from sin. When you're driving, you have to continually keep your hand on the wheel to keep the car on the road. And we have to continually repent of sin in order to stay on the road of God's Holy will.

John didn't come to make people comfortable in their sin. He came to call us out of it. That's exactly what got him killed. He called out the ruler, Herod Antipas for his sex life. Herod had stolen another man's wife. And while Herod was willing to tolerate John, his lover was not and she had him beheaded in prison for meddling in their bedroom. Calling out sin can be very costly for the caller. People don't like to hear it.

We often want to go directly to free parking without passing go. To go directly to Christmas, to Jesus, to getting saved without passing John the Baptist and preparing in the way he tells us to. By repenting! You may have been baptized and/or joined this or some other church, but if you've never repented of your sins, you are not saved. Repentance is a precondition. It doesn't mean we have to be perfect, none of us are, John the Baptist wasn't, but we ought to at least get our car headed in the right direction of obedience. A heart and soul that WANT to obey and follow Jesus in every way we know how. Yes, we'll run off the road sometimes. We'll get it in the ditch, but the rumble strips of God's Word and of His Holy Spirit should wake us up. John the Baptist should get our attention and help us get back on track. Luke says he was preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Let's look back at Luke 3:4 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, 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 mankind will see God's salvation.'"

So here we have the civil engineering blueprints of how to build a road into your heart for Jesus. Fill in the low, cut off the high, straighten the crooked. We do that by repenting of sin. Many years ago I attended a taxidermy seminar with my dad and I overheard someone talking about Interstate 81 being hilly. At the time it was one of the only interstates I knew of and I thought, you ought to drive over to the Fort! Compared to many interstates, however, 81 is hilly. But I try to imagine what it looked like in 1960 before they put it in. You can see the road cuts and the fills and the bridges today. No, it's not perfectly level, but it's a whole lot better than it was. And every time they do roadwork, they're still working at that.

We need to be doing constant road construction in our hearts. Taking out of our lives those high mountains of pride that stand in Jesus' way. Filling in those low places where we lack compassion and fail to do God's will by caring for the poor, loving and serving others, etc. Taking out what doesn't belong, the high places, filling in what does belong, doing what we know we should. Straightening out our crookedness of dishonesty. This is how we prepare for Jesus. For His Advent. For **Our** Emperor.

Vs 7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Wow. Doesn't sound like most TV preachers, does it? You bunch of snakes! Vs 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

Don't say to yourselves, our parents were deacons. We're church members. We're Americans. Etc. Produce the fruit of repentance! Act like it! What is that? It's obedience! He goes on to describe sharing with those who don't have clothes and food, being honest in all our dealings, personal, business, and otherwise. Treating people as we want to be treated. Healing relationships, forgiving and asking forgiveness. Being content with your pay. Etc. Obedience.

How would he answer that question today? Same way. Only he would probably spend a little more time on calling out our sexual sin, like he did Herod's. Our pornography, adultery, fornication, lust. Our materialism and consumerism, which is greed. Our judgementalism and unthankfulness. Our lack of commitment. Our over-weaning pride thinking we're right and everyone else is wrong. I'll tell you, if you really want to get ready for Christ, not Christmas, here's how you start!

But **do** we really want to get ready for Jesus? Or are we content to keep traveling in the direction we're going? If so, look at the map. Jesus told us the broad road of disobedience leads to hell. I don't want to end up there.

In some ways, John the Baptist did some of Jesus' dirty work of calling out sin. I had someone tell me once I should lighten up, be more positive. Praise God for the good news of Jesus! It doesn't get any more positive than that! All my sin washed away, eternity in heaven with Jesus! But we can't accept the Good News until we hear and repent of our bad news.

But let me say Jesus did His own share of calling out sin as well. As we just found recently in morning Bible Study, he flipped tables and drove the livestock out of the Temple. He condemned the self-righteousness of the Pharisees and Sadducees. He said lust was the same as adultery and hatred as murder. But His advance man, His opener, John the Baptist got people ready for Him. I have some old paint cans around my garage, anyone else? You used them and put the lids back on and now it will take dynamite to get the lids off. Some of our hearts are like that. With the power of the Holy Spirit, John the Baptist pried the lids off of people's hearts so they would hear what Jesus had to say. And thankfully many did.

Many did respond and repent as a result of John the Baptist including many of the disciples. Many had John baptize them so they would be ready for the forgiveness Jesus would purchase with His blood. John did work to bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. And today we join him in that. First we must repent of any known sin in our own lives and then call others to repent and obey as well. Invite them to start shaving off the mountaintops of greed or whatever else doesn't belong in their lives and to fill in the low spots of apathy or laziness and unbelief. That Jesus might have a straight shot into their hearts. And ours. If we think today we don't have anything to repent of, there's a good chance we have the most.

As a pastor, I want our congregation to be a people prepared for the Lord. Prepared to celebrate and honor His first coming and to be prepared for His second as well. And so today, on this first Sunday of Advent, let's ask the Holy Spirit to take His bull dozer, motor grater, track hoe, to take off our hills and to fill in our hollows. To straighten out our crookedness that Jesus might travel on a superhighway straight and smoothly into our hearts.