

Advent 2—C  
Luke 3:1-6  
*“Prepare the Way of the Lord”*

There is a lot to do to get ready for Christmas, isn't there? Fortunately, there is someone who makes an appearance every December to help us get ready for the big day. No, I'm not talking about Santa Claus. If anything, I'm talking about someone who must have been the opposite of Santa Claus: John the Baptist. Santa is a jolly man with a big belly. John strikes us as a rather stern person who was probably thin because of his diet of grasshoppers and honey. Santa wouldn't make anyone uncomfortable. John probably made plenty of people squirm. Santa's famous line is "Ho, Ho, Ho, Merry Christmas." John's famous line was much different. Our sermon text says: *“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’”* (4). Isaiah called John *“a voice”* because that's what was important about John, his voice and his message. His message is summarized in six words: *“Prepare the way of the Lord.”*

Today, we look at Luke 3 which records the beginning of the ministry of John the Baptist. Our main focus during the season of Advent is anticipation. We prepare our hearts to meet our Savior. How will we receive him today? How will receive him when he comes again in glory? Today we see that we need a straight path.

*“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip was tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene— during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness”* (1-2). Why does Luke include all those names? In ancient times they didn't measure time by BC or AD—which are based on the birth of Christ. Rather, each culture measured time based on the reigns of the kings. Luke was a thorough historian. He wanted the reader to know both the fact that these were historical events and also the precise timing of the historical events. And so he lists the rulers, starting with the ruler of the Roman Empire, Tiberius Caesar, but also including the local rulers in the Palestine area. He also included the spiritual rulers in Israel, the high priests. All of this to say that these events did not occur long, long ago, in a galaxy far, far away. They are real events, not myths and stories. He gave considerable historical detail so the facts could easily be checked by someone so inclined.

But there's a second thing that happened in relating this historical backdrop. Luke reminded his readers that both politically and spiritually, times were bad for the people of Israel. They were subjugated under Roman rule, so they were not a free people. Herod the Great was their immediate ruler, and was the epitome of megalomaniac, narcissistic rulers. And a little research into the High Priests, Anna and Caiaphas, revealed that they were not true spiritual leaders in Israel, but were puppets installed in office by Rome who cared nothing for the spiritual welfare of God's people. The situation was dire. The people needed help and rescue. Enter John. Check that. Enter God.

*“The Word of God came to John in the wilderness”* (2). The Word of God did not come to Caesar. Or Herod. Or the High Priests. It came to John. It did not come in Rome. Nor Israel's capital, Jerusalem. It came in the wilderness. God chose to speak through a man with no money, power or influence, in a place where he should have continued to have no influence. The Word of God came to him, and we find that this lowly man, of lowly birth, of lowly means became famous and influential. Because the Word he spoke was not his own, weak word. It was God's powerful, life-changing Word!

And what did he preach? What was the content of his message that God gave him? *“He went into the whole region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for*

*the forgiveness of sins. 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. Every valley will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be made low. The crooked will become straight, and the rough ways smooth. And everyone will see the salvation of God'*" (3-6). The Word that John was given to preach was: "*baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" This message and his ministry was something spoken about by Isaiah the prophet whose words are quoted here are from Isaiah 40:3-5. John's message and work were to prepare hearts for the Lord and turn them to the Lord.

Isaiah used a vivid picture to describe this work: "*Make his paths straight*" (4). The more things change, the more they stay the same. If the President of the United States is going to visit somewhere, first an advance team is sent in to prepare where the President is going. They plan out the route the president will take. What is the safest, most direct route? They make sure the local police department cooperates in blocking roads and controlling crowds. They evaluate road conditions. Is there pothole that needs filling? They carefully evaluate security. Where would assassins hide? How many secret service men need to be on the job? Where should they be especially watching? When all of the details are in place to make the president's arrival, and time on site safe, secure, and comfortable, then finally the president comes.

Nothing has really changed. In ancient times, they did the very same things. When a king was going to come to town, an advance team was deployed to prepare. A much bigger part of the preparation, however, was the preparation of the roads. Our main roads are pretty good throughout the U.S. But in ancient times, roads were rarely in good condition. Sometimes they may have even been non-existent. So preparing the way for a king to come may have included building a road at times. And to build a road fit for a king, it had to be as level and straight as possible. That meant lowering the high places and filling the low places. Too much up and down makes for a bad road.

How did John prepare hearts for God? "*Every valley will be filled in, and every mountain and hill will be made low*" (5). Those are metaphors for people who feel very, very low. Encourage the small and the broken and the weak, the guilty and the terrified. "*Every mountain and hill will be made low.*" You will also dynamite the pride in people and their arrogance to bring them down. And in this way, the Son of God, the Savior, will have a level path to walk on to get into their hearts. So Isaiah uses that picture to give us a picture of the work of John the Baptist. He was the advance team for the Savior of the world. No one was prepared. The high places of arrogance made the way unprepared. The low places of despair meant the way was unprepared. John was needed so people would be ready.

Are you ready for Jesus to come? What might be hindering your readiness to meet Jesus? Is there a lack of knowledge about God and his word? Are the distractions of our day keeping you from being properly prepared? Are you distracted by TV, internet, shopping, hobbies and the like? Is materialism blinding you to more important spiritual matters? Are you selfish? Are you impatient with others? Do you have impure or immoral thoughts? Do you let hurtful or gossiping words slip out of your mouth? Are you depressed? Are you despairing? All of these things are hindrances and barriers that must be removed. The high places cut down. The low places filled in. What in your life is preventing the Savior from coming to you?

This awareness of sin and sorrow over it is not something you do to save yourself. The truth is you can't accept him. You can't give yourself new life. You can't create the change of heart God is looking for. You can't cleanse yourself of sin. The awareness of sin and sorrow over sin helps us see the need for rescue, the need for a Savior. Without that awareness and sorrow over our sin, we can certainly roadblock, prevent, slow, stop, hinder, obstruct, delay, thwart, and hamper his work in you. Only with a full acknowledgement of

sin and its eternal, damnable consequences, do we get clear view of the rescuer, Savior and deliverer—Christ the Lord. He is the one that forgives all our sins.

John preached a *“baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”* (3).

*“Repentance”*: Change the way you think and act. A total change of heart. To do a 180. A heart that has engaged in sin, or content in sin, or satisfied with sin is a heart completely unprepared to meet Jesus. *“Forgiveness”*: To remove the guilt resulting from wrongdoing. Note that the wrongdoing itself is not removed. The guilt of the wrongdoer is removed. The event is not undone, but the guilt of having done it is removed. Guilt is before another, and the “other” we are guilty before is God. We can do nothing to remove the guilt. So God did everything to remove it when he sent Jesus to be our Savior. The guilt wasn’t simply forgotten. God didn’t say “that’s okay” to our sin. Our sin was atoned for. The guilt before God was taken off of our record and placed on Christ’s record. His blameless record was traded for our tarnished, filthy record. He was punished instead of us, and as we should have been. Rejoice in what Jesus does: He forgives your sin! He removed the guilt of your wrongdoing.

Another way of describing forgiveness is: setting free or liberating. *“Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of your sins.”* To be set free from the guilt of your sin. One of Satan’s most deceptive and successful lies is where he convinces us that sinning is freedom and righteousness is slavery. How can you be the most free? The most liberated? Satan tells you that if you do what you want, when you want, how you want, for yourself and your benefit and your self-interest—then you are the most free. You heard me say that and a part of you said: “Yeah. You just described total freedom. Do what you want, when you want, how you want, for yourself and your benefit and self-interest—and you are free. I’m on board!” You’ve bought the lie. That’s not freedom. Living for self is in fact the highest form of slavery and a path for utter misery. Living for self enslaves you Satan. You are doing his will. You are hurting yourself, others and most importantly, God. That’s not freedom at all. It’s a path that ends in total destruction!

Let me give a small example of how enslaving sin is. Think of a time when you sinned in such a way that it surprised even you. You did that thing you were sure you would never do. You violated your conscience. You violated the very value you hold highly. You value honesty, but you lied. You value purity, but you sinned sexually. You value loyalty, but you betrayed someone. You value kindness, but you were mean. You value patience, but you lost your temper. You value thriftiness, but you blew some money. I’m just priming the pump so you remember: that time when you sinned in such a way that you surprised yourself that you could do it. Do you remember the guilt? Do you remember the shame? Do you remember the burden and the weight? How could you? This is something you would never do, but you did it. Would you describe how feel (or felt) as liberating? Freeing? Just the opposite, right? Bound. Shackled. Shamed. Disappointed.

Now understand this. Although we don’t feel that way with every sin we commit, the same is factually true about every sin we commit. Every sin is an act that binds, restricts, burdens, shames. And this is just the smallest part of sin—the part that hurts you. More important is the hurt you cause others because of your sins. And more important than THAT is the hurt you cause God. Every sin is a declaration to God that his ways, word, will—his law—is not good, he doesn’t love you enough to give you a way that leads to happiness. You can’t trust him with your life, so you choose to take control of it yourself. With that attitude, you are a slave and you may not even realize it.

You and I both know that there are always those who refuse to get ready because they don’t think that they need it. They refuse to be humbled because they don’t think they have done anything wrong. And we find out several chapters later that there were many who refused to heed the call of John the Baptist. And then they refused the call of Christ.

Christmas came right to them, literally, and they missed it. They were not ready. God made the two go together. John first, then Jesus. We cannot skip to Jesus without first hearing the message of John. We cannot skip to Christmas with all its joy and its emotional peak unless we are first humbly prepared.

There is freedom for the captives. Recognize your sin. Recognize your slavery. And look to Jesus the one who releases you from the guilt of your sin. You can't undo what you've done. But God declared you not guilty in his sight. And that's just what he's done for you in Christ Jesus, at great personal cost to Christ.

Isn't that good news? You are free! You are liberated! Not free to sin, but free to serve God in righteousness and holiness!

Listen to that voice coming out of the wilderness. Repent. Change the way you think and act. Turn from sin to Christ and see God's salvation. Make straight paths. This is how to prepare for Christmas—and more importantly, to prepare for Christ. We will be ready to meet that baby born in Bethlehem. And we will be ready to meet the Lord Jesus when he returns in all his glory and majesty on the last day. *“And everyone will see the salvation of God.”* Christmas is almost here. It's time to prepare! Amen.

Hymns: 14, 11, 13, 16