

## **“Prepare the Way of the LORD”**

(Luke 3:1-6 – Advent 2 – December 8, 2024)

Luke 3:1-6 – <sup>1</sup>*Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene,* <sup>2</sup>*while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.* <sup>3</sup>*And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins,* <sup>4</sup>*as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight.* <sup>5</sup>*Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough ways smooth; <sup>6</sup>and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”*

Dear Redeemed in Jesus Christ our Savior:

Imagine trying to drive somewhere distant to visit loved ones, if the roads had never been prepared. Imagine trying to drive over every steep hill and mountain, through every crooked valley, and over every rough place filled with boulders, snow, trees, and other obstacles. How would you ever get where you wanted to go? Imagine looking forward to visiting loved ones, singing, “I’ll be home for Christmas...”; but if the roads were impassable, our song would end with “...if only in my dreams.”

In this season of Advent, we are preparing for the coming of our Lord Jesus. He is the most important Guest who wants to visit our home. He does not want any obstacle to stand between Him and us, as His loved ones. As we make outward preparations for Christmas, our text reminds us, above all, to prepare our hearts to welcome Jesus as our Savior. Let us take to heart these words: **“Prepare the Way of the LORD!”** 1) **Make His paths straight**, and 2) **See the salvation of God**.

### **1) Make His paths straight**

In ancient times, when a king was going to travel through His land to visit his people, he would send a messenger ahead to tell them to prepare the way. They did not want their king to find the roads unprepared with obstacles to prevent his visit.

Likewise, when the King of heaven came to visit His people on earth, He sent a messenger ahead. That was John the Baptist who went ahead of Jesus. As prophesied in Isaiah 40:3-5, quoted here: *“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every*

*mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough ways smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God''* (vs. 4-6).

Jesus Christ, the King of heaven, came to bring salvation to a world of sinners. That first Christmas, He was born in our flesh so He could go to the cross and take away the sins of all people. He came to save us from the horrible wages of our sin, which is death and hell. He came to win for us forgiveness and eternal life in His heavenly Kingdom. Why wouldn't every heart gladly receive Him? Why wouldn't every heart want to make His paths straight and welcome Him?

But sinful man cannot rightly prepare the way in his heart to receive the Savior. The sinful heart is full of obstacles like those pictured here. There are mountains of self-righteous pride, crooked paths of self-deceit, and rough places of love for sin.

In his pride, natural man imagines that he is not such a bad sinner that he would need heaven's King to come to him in the lowly way of the cross, to shed His blood to redeem him from sin. Natural man likes to think he can meet God by a way he prepares for himself. How many believe they welcome heaven's King by a path of their own good works. They feel that by their own good life they can become worthy of His favor and win a place in His heavenly Kingdom. By mountains of self-righteous pride, they keep the Savior of sinners from entering their heart.

On the other hand, with the coming of heaven's King, many just do not care. They are too absorbed in the kingdom of this world to care for His salvation. They seek life in passing possessions and pleasures. The last thing they want to do is acknowledge Jesus as their Lord and King, to forsake their sinful path and let Him rule in their hearts and lives. They put before Him crooked paths of deceitful desires and rough places of love for sin; obstacles that keep Him from entering their heart.

So when heaven's King came into the world, He sent John the Baptist ahead with a message to break down every obstacle and rightly prepare the way in human hearts. John came "*preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins*" (vs. 3).

That message of repentance begins with God's Law to blast away at sin. It is like when a road construction crew comes to a mountain. To penetrate the hard rock, they blast with dynamite. So the Law of God blasts away every mountain of self-righteous pride and hardness of heart in sinners that would prevent true faith in the Savior.

As we read on in Luke 3, John saw some who came out to the Jordan River, puffed up with the belief that they stood righteous before God by their own good life

and works. He saw those who wished to be called the people of God while continuing in their own sinful paths. If they came thinking they could receive John's baptism as a stamp of God's approval on them, they were dead wrong. John blasted away with the Law: "*Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance... Even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire*" (vs. 7-9). In other words, if they went their way merrily singing that one day they would be home in heaven, it was only in their dreams.

Therefore, what is the meaning of repentance, and what are its fruits? It begins with contrition, meaning we are truly sorry for our sins. As God's Law convicts us of our guilt, we acknowledge that we deserve His righteous wrath and hellfire. So we die to our pride. We confess our sins to the Lord, with hearts set on forsaking those crooked paths of deceit, and those unholy desires, thoughts, words, and deeds.

As we turn from our sin, repentance continues as we turn in faith to our Savior. This was the focus of John the Baptist's ministry. As that voice sent before the Lord, he pointed sinners to Jesus, saying: "*Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29). As John preached God's Law to convict sinners, and then God's Gospel to show them their Savior, God changed human hearts by His Word. By the power of His Holy Spirit in His Word, God worked repentance and faith in their hearts, faith that rightly welcomes the Savior.

So we read in Mark 1:5 that as people came to the Jordan River, they confessed their sins. And to such brokenhearted sinners who looked in faith to their Savior, John applied "*a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins*" (vs. 3). Not only did this mean that they were baptized *in view of* the forgiveness Jesus would win for them on the cross; but this baptism was a means of grace, by which God applied His washing to them "*for the remission of sins.*"

Today, the voice of God's messenger cries out in the wilderness of this world: "*Prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight*" (vs. 4). Isn't this just what we want to do, as those who by the grace of God have been called to repentance and faith in our Savior from sin? Isn't this just what we want to do, as those who now live in the cleansing power of our baptism into Christ? In daily repentance, we return to the waters of Baptism to drown every sinful desire, thought, word, and deed. We crucify the flesh; we die to sin. And in the power of Baptism, we rise up in Christ each day, lifted up by His cleansing forgiveness, strengthened in faith to walk in newness of life according to the Spirit of God in us.

## 2) See the salvation of God

So the Lord Himself prepares the way for His coming to us by His heart-changing Word. He makes His paths straight into our hearts, by working repentance and faith. In this way, as His messenger says: *“all flesh shall see the salvation of God”* (vs. 6).

As John testified, Jesus would go forth as the Lamb of God take away the sins of the world. Soon after this, Jesus Himself would come to be baptized by John at the beginning of His public ministry. The Savior would join Himself with sinners in Baptism, as the one who came to bear all our sins to the cross. Through His ministry, Jesus would proclaim the forgiveness and salvation He came to win for all. As He looked ahead to His sacrificial death, Jesus would say: *“And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself”* (John 12:32). Indeed, when He was lifted up on the cross, His nail-pierced hands were opened wide, drawing every sinner to repent and believe and see His salvation.

Heaven’s Lord and King has come! He has broken down every barrier between us and God. We have seen His salvation in the forgiveness of sins and eternal life He gives us! Jesus has won for us a place in His heavenly Kingdom!

And along with all this, He comes to us each day as the one who cares for us. When we find ourselves passing through a low valley, feeling down or troubled, even sinking into despair; our living Savior is here to fill every valley, to come and lift us up by His Word and promises, and show us His salvation once again. Take heart, dear child of God in Christ! You live in His forgiveness and favor. God loves you with the same love that led Him to give His Son for you – that never-failing love that guarantees He will give you all that you need in life.

And at last, the Lord and King who once came to win our salvation, and who continues to come and strengthen our faith by His Gospel in Word and Sacrament, will come again at the Last Day to bring us into His heavenly Kingdom. Never again will being home with loved ones be only in our dreams. Never again will any barrier separate us, not even death. We will be home with all our family of God in Christ, to share all the gifts He gives us in that everlasting Kingdom He has prepared for us!

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.