

**St. Paul Lutheran Church
Grant Park, Illinois
The Second Sunday in Advent, December 9, 2018
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—during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

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. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation.' "

Are you prepared and ready? This question has different levels of importance. Are you prepared and ready to go grocery shopping with a list in hand? Are you prepared and ready with a plan to evacuate a burning building? Are you prepared and ready to watch the Super Bowl? There are some things which require urgent planning to be ready for i.e. evacuating a burning building while being prepared to watch a sporting event or go grocery shopping don't.

Our gospel lesson today introduces us to a topic where the level of urgency is more like evacuating a burning building than it is grocery shopping, but people more often treat it with less urgency than getting ready for grocery shopping. What is the topic which our gospel lesson touches on? The Lord's return to our world. Today we are urged to prepare the way for the Lord. We do this by listening to his messenger, know a change of heart is needed and looking for his salvation.

The Lord introduces us to his messenger. **"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— during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. 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.'"

Luke pays a large amount of attention to details in these verses. He tells us who the Lord's messenger is, John, and who was ruling when he came. Not only does Luke give us details about John, but more importantly he assures us John is God's chosen messenger he had promised to send into the world long ago. What was this messenger's mission? He was preparing the people for the Lord's coming.

Our Old Testament lesson reflects the messenger's mission. **"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap."**

"He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver." Malachi's words in our Old Testament lesson reflect a fresh and strong position, don't they? He uses two colorful terms to describe the Lord's messenger. He compares him to a refiner's fire and a launderer's soap. What are the goals of a refiner's fire and a launderer's soap? Aren't they supposed to make dirty things clean?

Take for instance the launderer's soap. Imagine you are eating at a fancy restaurant. You have a nice white shirt or dress on. You are lifting a meatball to your mouth when it slips off of your fork. You can't catch it in time and it rolls down your shirt and leaves a giant streak on it. You need soap to get the shirt clean. Or imagine a farmer coming in from the field. He is covered from head to toe in dust, dirt and grime. A launderer's soap is needed for both clothes and body.

Or imagine your building a skyscraper in downtown Chicago. Would you want your metal superstructure which is a mixture of iron, copper, tin and zinc? Or would you prefer one made of 100% pure steel? You

want the steel because it is pure and strong rather than riddled with imperfections. The Lord's messenger prepares us to be like that 100% steel or cleans us when we are covered in dirt and grime, but there is one important thing you and I need to do. We need to listen to him when he speaks.

The Lord wants us to listen to his messenger when he speaks. Sounds clear and simple, right? The Lord wants us to listen to his messenger. Yet, we need to understand the message which the Lord gives to his messenger isn't always popular. **“(John) went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.”**

Luke records that John came proclaiming a message of repentance. What does repentance mean? Repentance can be defined like this, **“A ‘change of mind’ about one’s sin. The Bible uses the word ‘repentance’ in two senses: 1. sorrow over sin and desire to stop sinning; 2. sorrow over sin and faith in the forgiveness of sins.”** The Lord's messenger comes to call us to recognize a painful fact. God doesn't approve of the sinful choices we make and he doesn't want us keep thinking sin is a good thing.

Where are the places in your life where you need God's messenger to scrub clean the dirt of sin or purify with the fire of God's word? Isaiah says the messenger will make the high places low. Doesn't this bring to mind sinful pride? Do you have any areas where your pride needs to be made level? Maybe someone has wronged you. They apologized to you for it and have tried to move on. However, you don't want to move on. You keep bringing it up and reminding them that they wronged and hurt you.

Or what about the fact John was called to make the crooked places straight? What if he calls you to straighten out a crooked tongue? Someone says something to you in confidence and you betray their confidence by blabbing what they had to say to you or twisting it to make them look bad. Perhaps you have a friend who is seeking help for an alcohol problem. Your friend is really struggling with it and you blab around with a nod and upturned nose saying, “So and so is drinking again.”

Or are there rough areas of your life which need to be smoothed out? Do you think it is fine to say use bad language when you're around others who do and keep it clean when you're around those who don't? Do you deal harshly with someone when they make you mad or treat you unkindly? Do you like to knock a few back without ever wondering is it wrong to drink this much? Do you sorrow over the wrong you do and the fact you cover yourself with sin's filth? Or do you want to remain in your sins?

It isn't easy or fun to listen to God's messenger when he calls. His call to change and repent hurts. It scrubs and burns. It levels mountains and smooths out bumpy places. It urges the crooked to be made straight. He calls us to sorrow over sin because sorrow over sin prepares us for the Lord's coming. **“And all mankind will see God's salvation.”** John the Baptist prepared people to see the salvation which Jesus was bringing into our world.

We mentioned before repentance has two parts. Yes, one major part is sorrowing over your sin and wanting to stop sinning. However, there is a second major part to it. **“Sorrow over sin and faith in the forgiveness of sins.”** Repentance involves trusting Jesus has won forgiveness for your sins. John wasn't

the savior, but his message prepares people for the salvation which Jesus brings into the world. It made hearts ready to benefit from the healing and forgiveness which Jesus brings.

I pray John's message has had the same impact on you gathered here today. I pray you have been led to sorrow over your sins because Jesus is calling you to see his salvation. Jesus didn't hold it against people when they wronged and hurt them. He offered them love and forgave them for their sinful actions. He did this to win forgiveness for the times you build things up and won't move on from the wrong someone has done to you.

Jesus never allowed his tongue to become crooked or twist what others had to say to make them look bad. He spoke with kindness and compassion to others to win your forgiveness for the times you didn't speak with kindness or compassion. You and I may have rough patches in our life where we live a rough life in God's eyes, but Jesus' love for you and me empowered him to live a perfectly smooth life in God's sight to cover over the rough places in our life.

This is the salvation which John was pointing people towards. It was what he was getting them ready to see come into the world. John wanted the people to be ready for Jesus' coming. We are in a similar situation today. John is still getting us ready for Jesus' salvation to come. However, he isn't preparing us for Jesus' first coming. He is preparing us for his second where he will come and take his followers to his side forever in heaven.

The thing about Jesus' second coming is we don't know when it will happen. It could be today or it could be 100 years or more from now. The fact we don't know when he will return gives us extra urgency to be prepared for Jesus to return. He wants our hearts to be ready for his return. He doesn't want us to be caught living in sin or refusing to repent. He wants us to sorrow over our sin, leave it behind and trust he has won forgiveness for us.

How do you and I ensure we will be prepared for the Lord's coming? We will be ready when we continue to listen to his messengers he sends. We will be ready when we follow his messenger's call by repenting and changing our sinful ways, but more importantly we will be ready when we look for the salvation which Jesus is bringing into our world. He is coming to take you and me to his side in heaven. May he keep us ready and prepared for his coming. Amen.