

Preparing the Way
By Jason Huff
Isaiah 40:1-5, Proverbs 9:1-12, Luke 3:1-20

Our third lesson this week comes from Luke 3:1-20. Several weeks ago, at the start of Advent, we read together about birth of John, Jesus' cousin who would become a prophet. Today, Luke tells us of his ministry before Jesus began preaching and teaching. Here's what Luke writes... "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.'" 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? 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. 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." "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely-- be content with your pay." The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them. But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

Most of our lives are spent preparing. Just think about it...the vast majority of Americans spend at least 13 years of their lives in school, and many of us make it 17 through a four-year college. Add on a Master's degree and you're probably looking at 20 years of schooling just to work in a particular profession or interest. We just got done with the season of Christmas programs, and it took months of preparation to get together a 30-minute musical here at the church. Some of us take time every day to make a meal, and that can take an hour or more for a dinner that lasts maybe twenty minutes. It seems like a lot of our lives are wrapped up not in the "main event" but in preparation. Some of our jobs have it right in the title...we prepare an income tax statement or prepare aircraft for takeoff. Did you know there actually is an organization called the American Planning Association? There is an American Institute of Certified Planners! Professional full-time planners make on average \$70 grand a year! I guess it really pays to be prepared!

At the same time, it always feels bad when you find out at the last minute that you're not as prepared as you think you are. We've been trying to close on a house for a while now, and near the end of November, I went to the bank with all sorts of paperwork in hand...bank accounts, savings accounts, 401Ks, where I work, who I work with, you know the drill. And when I gave them all of that information, they were really impressed...except that it wasn't the information *they* wanted. They wanted a particular bank statement and a certain copy of a certain file...you know how that goes. And while it was easy enough to get all that together, you can't help but get that feeling in the pit of your stomach when what you thought you had planned falls through or doesn't work.

I've also found in my life that there have been times when I have been really unprepared as a Christian. Sometimes I've been confronted by somebody asking for money on a street corner and I pass them by, not because I don't want to help them but because I have just been incredibly unprepared to deal with the issue...I hadn't thought enough about whether giving them money might be helping them or hurting them, or if I should take them to Mickie D's down the street or do a grocery run with them...and by that time, both of us are long gone. I have to admit that there have been times that I didn't share my faith as well as I should have because I wasn't prepared. And still at other points, I've said, "God, why aren't you getting done in my life what I want to get done? Why haven't you cured me of this problem or that sin or that temptation?" And maybe even just now, just from studying this passage this week, I realize that I haven't prepared the way for God to do what I've been asking Him to do. Maybe this week, by looking at John and what he preached, we can be prepared for God to do what He wants to do in our lives and in our church and in our community.

Luke starts telling us about John by telling us when his ministry started. He does it by listing a number of key figures in the region at the time. Luke isn't interested in establishing a precise time period – if he had, he would have been more specific. But instead, he names a number of people that were in power, starting with Tiberius Caesar but moving down to local political figures like Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas, and Herod's brother Philip. He also gives us the religious setting, mentioning the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. Luke tells us all of this because these authority figures were on the opposite side of John's preaching. Herod Antipas and his brother were corrupt, and they had their own issues – Herod Antipas had taken Philip's wife as his own, and John the Baptist called him on it. Pilate, meanwhile, had established himself as a headstrong man with little respect for the culture or beliefs of the Jews. Annas was another player...he wasn't even the high priest at the time, but he was a "mover and shaker" in the religious system because his five sons had also become high priest...and Caiaphas was his son-in-law. All these people were after power, and John was a threat to them.

So Luke tells us that the word of God came to John – which is the same wording used throughout the Bible to denote a prophet – and he starts preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He's preparing people that the Lord is coming, and Luke goes so far as to quote the passage from Isaiah we heard this morning to establish that John's purpose is to straighten the path for the coming Christ.

Now John's baptism is really different...it's not what people are expecting at all. In the Old Testament, there are times when people are told to clean themselves as part of a ritual, but there're only a very few times when somebody else does the washing. Baptism symbolizes that it is God who cleans us; we aren't the ones who can clean ourselves. What's also important here is that John is not just baptizing people for the sake of getting them ritually clean. He wants them to be clean from the inside out. That's why John preaches repentance, literally a turning around, a change of mind. The outside cleaning in the Jordan River symbolized what was happening inside of each person who came to the water, and the forgiveness that God gives based on that turning and cleansing.

When people come out to John to hear what he has to say, he's not a friendly guy. First off, he calls them the brood of vipers. Now not only are they the sons of really nasty snakes, but Adam and Eve were deceived by the serpent in the garden of Eden. It's like John is calling them children of the devil! This seems really harsh, but a lot of the Jews thought that because they were Jews, God would automatically save them...they were God's chosen people, the descendents of Abraham. But John says, "No, wait a minute, God can make descendants for Abraham out of these rocks if He wanted too. There's nothing here to protect you if you act sinfully. So start acting like you really mean not to sin anymore!"

John knows that they will they will bear good fruit, that good deeds will follow them, if they really want to serve God and have turned away from their old ways. And he gives them a warning...because they haven't been bearing good fruit, the axe is set, ready to cut them down. It doesn't mean they don't have the opportunity to change their lives; that's what John is here for. But his caution comes to let them know that if they don't change, if their lives bear only the bad fruit of their bad choices, they won't be a part of God's grove any more. They'll be thrown out. To an Israelite who had believed that God had chosen them and that's all that mattered, this was really alarming.

John's gospel sounds harsh, but it got responses. People realized, "Hey, you know, this is me! I'm the bad tree John's talking about!" And so they start asking John what they should do. And his answers are surprising because they are the total opposite of what we would expect. Here's this radical guy out in the desert baptizing people, telling them to flee God's eventual wrath if they don't change their ways. What would *you* expect? It wouldn't be shocking if John told them that they had to come out in the desert to live with his community of faith. It wouldn't have been a stretch for him to say, "You've got to leave that old world behind and have nothing to do with it." But this isn't what he does at all. Instead, he gives the most basic instructions, the kind of things that are incredibly simple but point the way back to God. You've got an extra tunic to keep out the cold but the guy down by the river doesn't have one? Well, give him your extra one! You've got a couple of loaves of bread but your neighbor's running short this week? Share it with them! They are simple things. It's not a huge sacrifice; it's just putting things right and starting to think in a godly way.

And I'm sure some of the people who came were really surprised by John's answers. Now we're told that tax collectors and soldiers came to see John and wanted to know what to do. Both of these professions were held in low regard in the day. Usually what happened was that whoever made the highest bid to the Roman government got a contract to collect taxes. They had a certain amount they had to collect to cover their bid, but everything else they collected was gravy. Tax collectors could get very rich very quickly if they overcharged everybody, which was legal. On the other hand, soldiers that worked for Herod didn't get paid very well, but they were known for "shakedowns" and blackmail to make extra money. The people who came out to John who saw them standing there probably expected John to tell them to quit their jobs. But instead, John says, "Don't cheat people. Don't collect more than what is required. Don't threaten people to make money on the side. Be content with what you have." What he tells them to do is difficult, but it's simply putting the Old Testament into practice. It's nothing unexpected. In fact, it's almost mundane. These folks are despised as some of the worst sinners of the day, and John doesn't turn them away. He just tells them to change *how* they do *what* they do. If they do these things, everybody around them is going to notice the good fruits that will come from their preparing their hearts for God to come in.

The people who are coming out to see John start getting curious. Could this guy be the promised one? He's a prophet, and he's teaching with authority. But John stops them right there and humbles himself. John says, the person who's coming after me is so powerful, I'm not worthy to untie his sandals. Now this was a huge thing – by custom, one of the few things you could not ask a Jewish slave to do was untie your sandals. It was beneath them. John is saying, "I'm nothing in comparison to the One who's coming with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He's coming to clear the threshing floor, the place where the good wheat is separated from the shell you can't eat. He's going to gather the wheat together and get rid of the useless stuff." John is preparing the way so that some are ready to listen once Jesus comes...and others become stubborn and hard-hearted. John makes it clear...he is just the one announcing the arrival of the coming Messiah...be ready. And at the end of the passage, we learn that John's job is done when Herod proves himself to be among the hard-hearted who not only doesn't repent, but imprisons John rather than to hear his message. The herald is gone, making way for Jesus.

What John did may seem unimportant in the grand scheme of things. His ministry amounts to all of twenty verses in Luke's gospel. But John's message is one that resonates throughout Jesus' ministry, and it's one that we too often miss. And John's message is this: get prepared for God's Kingdom to come to you! Now there are a few things I want to point out here as we think about this. First, John's message is not to unbelievers or to people who have never heard of God. God does not expect that those who have never heard the truth about Him are going to be instantly prepared to listen to His message, particularly a message like this one that talks about both God's forgiveness and God's wrath. John is speaking only to the Jewish people. Even though some Jews only casually observed the faith of their forefathers, they had still been instructed in God's ways and had been taught how to live in a right relationship with God. This was not something brand new to them. John was calling them to turn back to what they already knew. They needed to know that what God had said in the past was coming true in the present, and they'd better be ready for it. You have to know what you're preparing for. So we shouldn't take this story to be about God being full of wrath for those who don't know about Him; it's a story that once we do know about God, we need to prepare to be in His presence.

The second truth we see in this passage is that if we want God to start working in our lives, really and truly, then we've got to prepare by doing what we know with the tools we've got. John doesn't spring any surprises on them. John says, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." Do those things that show that you mean business about being on God's side of things. Do the things you know God wants. Feed the hungry. Be compassionate to those in need. Act in humility and don't cheat the little guy. It's not piety for the sake of piety; it's not filling up the food bank just to score points with God. It's making sure to right the wrongs we've done and getting our lives in line with God's desires.

Now part of this requires getting into the Word of God and knowing what God has already said to us. As we were getting ready to move into our new house, I started scouting out the cabinet doors. The last owner of the place left it in really pretty great shape, but he took every last cabinet handle in the place. So I went in and eyeballed the holes in the cabinets and went to Lowes and bought some handles. Problem was, I wasn't prepared and I didn't have my tools with me...I didn't bring my measuring tape with me...so guess what? You can't fit a three and a half inch handle on a door that's ready for a three and three quarter inch handle! So now I have the hassle of going back to Lowes, exchanging the wrong handles, and then finding the handles I really need. What a waste of time! But in the same way, if you don't get into the Word of God on a regular basis and know what it says, you won't be able to prepare yourself for the work that He wants to do inside of you. All the tools you need are in that book, and all the directions on living a life prepared for God's leading are right there in front of us. It's a hard book sometimes, but that's what I'm here for and the church is here for, to help explain the hard parts and get us to an understanding. If we're going to be prepared to do what God asks, we've got to read the manual he's given us. As Christians, we can know what God desires from us and how to prepare ourselves for His work in us.

It also means that we have to examine ourselves when things aren't working out the way we expect. Sometimes we pray and we don't see any answers and we don't see our spiritual walk with God getting any better and we wonder why. In our Wednesday night Bible study a few weeks ago, we examined a number of God's responses to our prayers. Sometimes what we are asking for is wrong...but sometimes our request is fine but our timing is wrong. Sometimes God needs us to grow spiritually before He fulfills a specific prayer...and sometimes God says, "Yes!" But if we aren't prepared and looking for God's answers, when nothing happens, we think God's not there. If we aren't preparing ourselves for God's work in our lives, it might happen and we won't even notice!

It means that we also have to make sure we as a church are prepared. I have to say that I've been really pleased to see how the church has come alive in the past few months. I've been glad to see old members start attending regularly and new folks start coming. We've been opening new doors so that people can find their place. By the end of the month, we've got planned a second daytime Bible study, and we'll start a confirmation class for our youth. We've got another movie night on the way. All these things are great. But we have stay vigilant in our preparation so that when visitors come, we can say that we are ready to help them become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ, and ready to help their families become an integrated part of the church family. Just like you would make sure the floors were swept and the meal ready when you had guests at your home, so too do we have to prepare our church home.

All of this sounds like a lot of hard work, to keep ready for God to do what He wants to do in our lives and in our church. But the final truth I see in this passage is what makes it all so much more possible. John reminds us that Jesus comes not just with the water of baptism but with the baptism of the Holy Spirit. We who are baptized believers now have an advantage that believers in the days of John didn't have...the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit still worked in those days...He still revealed God's Word to His prophets and guided God's people throughout history...but until Jesus' resurrection, He never stayed permanently with anyone. But now, we have the leadership of the Holy Spirit to guide us. We know we are not alone. When we aren't sure of what to do or what to pray for or how to get ourselves ready for God's work in our lives, the Holy Spirit prays for us and intercedes on our behalf before our Heavenly Father. The Holy Spirit reminds us of Jesus' words and teachings. The Holy Spirit is there to do what we can't do. And even if we haven't yet committed our lives to Christ, even if we've never experienced baptism, the Holy Spirit is still at work, moving in our hearts so that we might be ready when the time is right to accept God's gift of salvation and embrace who God is and love Him as He has loved us. If you've never given your life over to Him, if you aren't sure how to prepare for God to work in your life and to change you from the inside out, all you have to do is ask him to do it, and He will. Sometimes the best preparation for a party is to ask someone else who's a professional to plan it for you. In the same way, all you have to do is simply to ask the One who gave His life for you to straighten your life around, and He will.

John stood in the wilderness, preparing the way so that people's hearts and minds might be open to Jesus' message. May our hearts and minds be ready and prepared today so that God can use us for His glory and fulfill His purposes in us so that the world He dearly loves might know of His goodness and grace and salvation. Let's pray.