

“Being Prepared”
Luke 3:1-14
Second Sunday in Advent
December 9, 2018

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, *He said therefore to the crowds... “Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’”*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

There are few texts in Scripture as heavy on Law as this one. Sure, there are a lot of Scriptural passages that point us to God’s Law. But, not quite like this... not with the zeal and the character of John the Baptist. But that zeal of John is needed; it’s not overkill or superfluous. We sinners need to be shaken from our sloth, we need to be prepared, lest we miss the import of the moment.

We often forget that to “be prepared” is something that happens *to us*. In grammar, there’s an *active* voice (you do something), a *passive* voice (something is done to you), and a *middle* or “reflexive” voice (do something to or upon yourself, for your own sake). We often think of the phrase “be prepared” as something in that “middle” voice so that we are being told to prepare for our own sake, so that – upon completion – we have “prepared ourselves.”

But John the Baptist is sent by God to prepare the way for the Lord’s Christ to make us “prepared.” So important is this preparation that our reading of Malachi prophesies not solely the

Christ's work, but the messenger's preparatory work: "Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me." And that preparation is not necessarily 'fun'!

When the Scriptures say that man loves the darkness and, by sinful nature, detests the light and does not want to come out into the light, why should we expect that the Lord's preparatory work on our hearts will be *enjoyable*. When you prepare for any medical procedure that works to beat back infection or cancer or illness of any kind, the preparatory work is not fun! Same with the Lord's work in beating back and overcoming our sin! Those who want the church to be 'fun' and 'enjoyable' unwittingly confess that they've already forgotten what the work of the Divine Service is all about – beating back and removing *sin*!

And so, it's of *John's* work that the prophet says,

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled (notice the passive voice mixed with the active: you are told to 'prepare the way', but by John calling you to repentance – your valleys shall be filled (passive) by John's preaching of repentance)... Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways."

Now, if this is John's work being highlighted, if this is the preaching of the Law being highlighted, then it ought inform you of what to expect from every preacher of God's Holy Law:

- “Every valley shall be filled” – not “every valley shall fill itself” ... so expect to hear preaching and admonition that fills your unrighteousness with an awe and respect for and trembling at God’s righteousness.
- “Every mountain and hill shall be made low” – so expect to hear preaching and admonition that is not afraid to point out your pride and self-centeredness and *level* it before the throne of God!
- “The crooked shall become straight” – so expect preaching and admonition that shows you where you’re off track and calls you to repent and carry on in keeping straight God’s Ten Commandments.
- “The rough places shall become level” – so expect preaching that employs the third use of the Law and teaches you how to live in level-headed godliness and Christian love.

And as you hear such preaching of repentance, then it makes sense that John would say, “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” If you are taught God’s holy Law boldly, assertively, unashamedly, then there is no question what fruit comes from such repentance. If God’s Law tells me that abortion is wrong, then I will at least know what is God’s will: to wrestle against sin to rejoice in God’s continual procreation of children; If God’s Law tells me that marriage is to be protected from all sin, then the Christian conscience will bear fruit in defending the marriage estate from premarital abuse, adultery, divorce, redefinition, even complacency – and I’ll start with my own marriage. If I am taught by God that I am wrong for turning my desires into little idols that constantly vie for my attention, then the penitent will bear fruit in wrestling against sin and rejoicing in

anticipation of the Divine Service and in making God's Word and will more a part of my daily life. If God's Law tells me that I am a sinner, then I will pray for the Gospel to strengthen me in my struggling and wrestling daily to put down that sinner and drown him to make way for the New Adam who has been given me in baptism.

There's not a lot "fun", "enjoyable" or "easy" about John's preaching. Just when we think we've got it figured out and can rest easy from repentance and forgiveness because we can appeal to our Christian status, he says, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have a privileged status!'" If the children of Abraham could not appeal to their status as an excuse not to repent, then you can't appeal to your status in the family of God as an excuse not to repent or need forgiveness. Even now, the axe is laid to the root of the trees, and John is ready to put that axe to work!

But what does that look like before our eyes and sound like in our ears? How does the preaching of John 'affect us'? Is it simply him saying, "Repent," and we responding, "Okay, I repent", and then continuing on with good news of the Messiah and his cross?

We get a taste of John's hands-on pastoral care when we read the end of our text, "And the crowds asked him, 'What then shall we do?' And he answered them, 'Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.... [To tax collectors, he said,] Collect no more than you are authorized.... [To soldiers, he said,] Do not exhort money from

anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.’”

Note the preacher’s response: He doesn’t just say, ‘repent, and bear fruit’ and then leave them to figure out what that means. He rolls up his sleeve and gets involved in the details of their daily life and shows them how to do better, how to bear fruit in their specific vocation! Think about that! The Scriptures don’t tell us our shepherds will simply say something generic, ‘Go bear fruit,’ and then we figure out what that looks like.

Another way to explain this: A pastor may say to the whole congregation, “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance”... but he’s not ‘invading your space’ if he says to you in matters of individual pastoral care,

- “Repent to your spouse”
- “Go tell the truth to your parents”
- “You *are* your brother’s keeper.”
- “Turn off the TV once in a while, and take seriously your duty to teach your family the things of God.”
- “Throw away the alcohol; stay away from the drugs; get rid of the pornography”
- “Stop making idols out of Little League, cheerleading, and school extracurriculars”
- “Stop grumbling.... And be patient with and love and encourage or make amends with your fellow church member”
- “Get yourself to Divine Service and to Bible Study!”

None of us enjoys hearing any of that – I know I don’t, and I don’t even enjoy being the one to say it! We want pastors to generically

say “Repent, Bear fruit” and ourselves (or ‘personal/family counselors’) to decide what that should look like in daily life. But, through John’s preaching, God asserts *His* say into our daily lives. His Ten Commandments are not generic ideals, but – where we learn how to apply them – impact every detail of daily life.

.... And yet, all of this Law is so necessary, this call to repentance so beneficial, this overseeing of bearing fruit in keeping with repentance so vital because – what is on the horizon? – it all culminates in this: “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” That doesn’t mean all flesh will *benefit*... it means all flesh will have it made known to them. Thus, repent and bear fruit in keeping with repentance, that your eyes, ears, members, reason and all your senses do not prevent you from receiving this salvation of God when it comes in the flesh!

For when it comes, our Old Testament reading says, “He will purify the sons of Levi”... notice that? Even the sons of Levi (even those chosen priests of God’s covenant with his people) need purifying... and yet, Christ – the greater high priest – *will* purify them through his blood of his sacrifice and ‘refine them like gold and silver.’ And, if the sons of Levi can be purified (because how embarrassing is that! – that the sons of the priesthood, who should know better, need to be purified), then won’t we sons of the gentiles also be purified? Isn’t God’s grace in Christ also for you, too? And, if that righteousness of Christ is powerful enough to scrub clean the

Levites, whose sins proved God's holy Israel to be unholy and unrighteous, then certainly His righteousness is powerful enough to purify *our* unrighteousness. As the apostle says, "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from *all* unrighteousness."

In fact, so thoroughly will the coming Christ's righteousness refine us, the Old Testament reading implies, that it will declare us to be pure as gold and, therefore, make our offerings pleasing to the Lord. In other words, though everything we touch in our sin is unholy, everything we touch in faith in Christ is purified by Him and is therefore pleasing to the Lord. Isn't that the case?... we mentioned this in Bible Study last Sunday... the offerings of a thankful people are a part of the liturgical life between God serving his people and his people praising their God. And those offerings of money, faithfulness in daily vocation (time, talent, treasure) can be part of that liturgical life not because *we* are keeping a new rule in *our* righteousness, but because Christ's righteousness covers the whole relationship and liturgical communication between God and man.

This is what the relationship of repentance and the forgiveness of sins looks and sounds like – the Divine Service is not *foreign* to daily life, but simultaneously the *foundation* and *pinnacle* of each week of daily life. That, here, in this place, our eyes of faith in the Messiah may see the salvation of God – "Lord, let your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word, for mine eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all

people” – yes, he prepared it before the face of all people... or, as our Gospel reading recollects the words of the prophet, “All flesh shall see the salvation of God.” There on that cross, behold, God’s Lamb, who takes away the sin of the world... who covers your unrighteousness with the blood and sacrifice of his righteousness. What a breathtaking truth... God forbid that we miss out on it.

That’s why our Gospel text shows John working so hard to make straight the ways of the Lord. That’s what John is preparing us for this Advent season and teaching us for each week of life – to behold the beauty of the Christ’ righteousness, which can only be seen if we know the ugliness of our unrighteousness. That’s why the Law is to be preached with its full strength, to curb sin, call to repentance, exhort and admonish righteousness, and to prepare the faithful for the coming of Christ – once in history to offer up the atoning sacrifice, weekly in flesh and blood to share the fruit of his cross – to bring with him forgiveness of sins and the great rejoicing the faithful have that, because of Jesus, *our* flesh shall see the salvation of God!

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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