

“THE MESSENGER SAYS, “PREPARE THE WAY FOR THE LORD!”

Prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight paths for Him – who loves you! Amen

This year, the Gospel readings which we will hear are predominantly from the Gospel of Luke. Since this is the case, it may be helpful to offer a bit of background. Luke most likely was a Gentile. He was a very learned man, a gifted author, a physician by trade. He was not one of the 12 disciples, but he was an eye witness (Luke 1:2) who he carefully investigated everything he wrote his Gospel and in the book of Acts. From Acts we know that he was at least a part-time traveling companion with Paul on his missionary journeys. And for that reason, his writings were for a predominantly Gentile audience who needed to know that Jesus Christ had fulfilled the Scriptures, that Jesus was innocent of all crimes even though he was crucified by Pontius Pilate, that this Jesus rose and lives; that this was all part of God’s plan to save them from their sin!

The portion of this morning’s Gospel comes right after Luke’s most famous Chapter – the Christmas Eve Gospel of Luke 2. In chapter 3 picks up 30 years later as we meet the forerunner – John the Baptist. In olden days, before a king or high-ranking ruler traveled, a messenger was sent ahead to get people to repair the roads on which the king was to travel. John was that messenger. He was sent out ahead of God’s Son to prepare people the coming of the Savior-King.

This morning God’s messenger comes to us. We’re going want to listen closely because for each of us, there is some road work in our hearts that needs to be done to prepare the way for the Lord. But let’s be clear, just like last week with Lot and his family who wouldn’t leave but had to be almost dragged out, the Lord himself must do this road work in our hearts; and he does. So, as we listen carefully, let us realize that a change of heart is needed, and let us then see the Salvation our Savior-King comes to bring to us and to all.



I. The Messenger has been Sent by God (vs.2,4)

There’s a very good reason why each of us want to listen carefully to this messenger’s message. This messenger does not represent himself; he is not sharing his thoughts and opinions. He brings word from the all-powerful Lord of heaven and earth. *The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert...* What we’re about to hear, comes from the mouth of God. Just that very thought is enough to silence to everything else – so that we can give this message our full attention.

The fact that it is even coming to us, to sinful mankind, is grace itself! We’ve done nothing special to deserve this “heads-up.” God would have been within his full purview to send burning sulfur upon our heads just as he did upon Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet, God obligated himself to send a messenger ahead of his arrival. He did so because of this one fact alone: he is a gracious and merciful and compassionate God. He obligated himself 700 years before the birth in Bethlehem when, through the Prophet Isaiah, he foretold that such a messenger and forerunner would come. People would be able to recognize this messenger by where he came from - the desert. But even more so, they would recognize him by his message. So, when they saw and heard John, they were to know the king was coming!

John the Baptist was indeed that very forerunner; he was the Lord’s appointed messenger. His message still goes out today, to us and all people today – and how critical it is that we and all people hear it for this reason alone: mankind is totally incapable preparing to meet to God. Because of sin, mankind cannot approach God. In fact, because of sin, all mankind can do is flee from God in shame, running away in fear. It’s what Adam and Eve did as soon as they sinned. It’s what sinners continue to do every time they sin. We cover up, hide, run away from God. God must not only make the first move, but he must do it all – and that he did.

He gave Adam and Eve the promise of an offspring of a woman. He gave promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He continued to give more and more details about the Messiah through David and the Prophets. He gave these because of his merciful desire to save fallen sinful mankind – including you and me. This is why we want to listen to THIS messenger who has so graciously brought the Lord’s message to our ears and hearts. The King is coming and there’s road work that needs to happen immediately.

II. The Messenger Announces that a Change of Heart is Necessary (vs. 3,5)

Anyone in the civil engineering field knows about the monstrous amount of work necessary in road-building: surveying, bulldozing the initial path, grading down the higher areas, leveling out lower parts, considerations for water runoff, compacting the base underneath... on and on. When John the Baptist says, "Prepare the Way," he's not just talking about slapping down a little asphalt in the pot holes; this is major work that is necessary for a change in our hearts to happen. With four vivid illustrations, the quote from Isaiah shows us how John's call for a change of heart goes out to every kind of sinner.

"Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. All these obstacles are sins of some kind; they must be removed. There are those who dwell in the deep dark abyss of sins: in shameful wickedness, in debauchery, in self-indulgent pleasure and hedonism. There are those whose heads are high in the clouds, full of self-righteous arrogance, full mountains of pride. There are those who are crooked and dishonest in their ways: stealing, cheating, lying, swindling for their own benefit. There are some who live a very rough life: bullies, thugs, brawlers, murderers, never loving or caring for their neighbor.

And while it would be easy enough for us to look out into society and find others who fit these descriptions, we need to realize these words are coming to our ears and our hearts. Each of us knows how our sinful nature revels in wicked base sins, how pride heaps up and up, how we've been crooked in our ways, or cared less for our neighbor. The highway for our coming Savior-King is rush-hour slammed with sin that has to be completely cleared! Right there, tells us that this is something we cannot do on our own, and yet it must be done! So, to us John comes, bringing exactly what we need – the Power of the Holy Spirit working through the powerful word of God!

Our text tells us that John ***"went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."*** Through the Word and baptismal waters, the Holy Spirit works the very repentance needed in our hearts. To REPENT means to have a change of mind about sin and salvation. A changed repentant mind turns away from sin, no longer finding pleasure in it, but realizing that leads to eternal damnation. In the same way a repentant mind realizes that salvation is not obtained by "being good" but instead by trusting solely in God's promised Savior from sin. This is what it means to repent – to do a complete about face, a 180.

God the Holy Spirit works this repentance in our hearts as God's Law is preached. We see our sin for what it is. And in the same way, the Holy Spirit works faith in us as God's powerful Gospel is preached, clearing the highway completely so that we can see exactly what God want us to see. This is what the last verse of our text is all about: ⁶ ***And all mankind will see God's salvation."***

III. The Messenger points us to the Salvation of our God (vs. 6)

Friends, let us give thanks that God's message has come to us – not just once, but continues to do so. Each day the voice of one calling in the desert calls us to repent, turning from the constant allure of sin, and turning to the forgiveness, love of our gracious God. Each day God's Inspired Messengers keep our eyes, ears, hearts, minds focused on the Salvation which our God has prepared for us: Salvation that took on flesh, was born in a manger, lived that perfect, sinless, holy life, died that innocent bitter death, rose in full power and glory. This Salvation of our God is Christ Jesus. He is your Savior King and mine! He is God's Salvation for all mankind to see and hear and trust and put their faith in.

And for as much as we give thanks to God for sending to us many "John the Baptists" – pastors, teachers, Christian parents and friends who have kept God's Law and Gospel before us, who bring the power of the Holy Spirit to us in Word and Sacrament – let us also realize that God has made us to be Voices of Ones Calling in the desert, heralding the same message, "Prepare the Way for the Lord!" Oh, but who will listen to me? What do say? How can I do this?

The same Holy Spirit who leads us to repent and to see our Salvation, is the same one who perfectly equips you and me and all believers to share do just this. You don't have to go out into the desert or down to the Truckee River. You can share God's Word around the dinner table with your family. You can invite a friend to come to church with you, perhaps on a Sunday, or a Wednesday evening, or Christmas Eve. You can prepare that highway for the Lord to enter as you gently correct a loved one caught in sin or as you comfort a saddened soul with God's love. Afterall, it's not about us, it's about God's goal – so that all mankind will see the Salvation of our God – that more and more and more people will see Jesus, as their Lord, as their Savior, as their King, as their Salvation. Amen.