

God's Word Prepares God's Way

Luke 3:1-6

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St. Paul's Lutheran, North Freedom

In the fifteenth year 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.’” (Luke 3:1-6, NIV84)

Dear friends, fellow believers in Jesus Christ our Savior:

It's ugly. It's inconvenient and annoying. I'm talking about road construction. It's frustrating when you see the sign, "Road Work Ahead," the speed limit comes down, a lane is closed and so traffic is backed up, or even rerouted to a detour. Miles of dirt mounds and construction equipment mar the scenery. But when it's all done and you're traveling on a nice, smooth road, you're glad that they did the road construction on it.

Over 700 years before Christ, the Lord spoke through his prophet Isaiah about a voice calling in the desert: "Prepare the way for the Lord." John the Baptist fulfilled that prophecy. Like a road construction foreman, he called on people to straighten their crooked ways, level their hills and valleys, and smooth over their rough spots. Let's take a closer look today at John the Baptist's ministry that shows us how **God's Word Prepares God's Way**.

Luke's gospel informs us exactly when John made his appearance: "The fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar," emperor of Rome, which would make it AD 26. A number of other rulers are mentioned as well, some that played a role in Jesus' life like Pontius Pilate, the tetrarch Herod (tetrarch was ruler of a fourth of a kingdom), and the high priests Annas and Caiaphas. You might wonder why this long list. The Lord is letting us know that what is written here isn't a long-ago legend or a myth, but a real person at a real place at a real time in history. And this was a momentous time, for the Lord God himself was about to make his appearance.

The "word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert," and he went throughout the Jordan River Valley to proclaim that message. Luke summarizes it as "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." The message, "Repent!", called on the people who came to have a change of heart and mind about sin. They needed to turn from their sins and be ready, for the Lord was coming soon. John also baptized. Years before Jesus told his church to make disciples by "baptizing them in the name of the" triune God, John was already baptizing people who came to the Jordan River. But baptizing of a sort was already being done in Old Testament times. Old Testament laws commanded the people to do ceremonial washings before worship and entering God's presence. So as John baptized, the people learned to repent and have their sins washed away.

The Word calls on us to prepare for Christ's coming by repenting. Let's use Isaiah's road construction picture again. "Make straight paths....The crooked roads shall become straight." What's crooked in our lives? Anything that deviates from God's law highway: Wandering away

from church, turning aside to false teachings, dabbling in witchcraft or occult practices, using God's name to curse and swear instead of to pray and praise. Don't be crooked; go on God's straight path!

"Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low." With "valley" don't think of a wide expanse like the Baraboo River Valley, but a sharper ravine or crevice made by an earthquake or a landslide. Roads broken apart by them need repair. So also our lives, sunk in by sin and then by despair, need to be filled with God's Word. But then there are mountains and hills in our lives that need to be leveled: Mountains of pride, hills of puffing up ourselves, selfishness. Lower yourself, humble yourself before the Lord comes!

And "the rough ways" made "smooth." Any sin becomes like potholes in our lives—maybe they don't seem all that big, but like potholes they can damage cars. Whether it's gossip or envy, bitterness or hatred, lust or greed, repent, turn from the sin! Let's not be satisfied with saying, "OK, I got rid of some of my sin, but I'd rather not part with these sins." Road construction that doesn't remove all the obstacles will fail to make the road ready for traffic. Incomplete repentance fails to make our heart ready for the way of the Lord.

The goal of repentance is "the forgiveness of sins." This too is a picture, sometimes called "remission of sins," or sending it far away, as we read in Psalm 103:12: "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." Picture God wrapping up our sins in a big ball and hurling it across the universe where they'll be long gone. That's what the Father did when he sent his Son! When John's relative Jesus appeared, John pointed to him: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Jesus removed our sins, once for all, when he lived a life without any sin and when he suffered death, the penalty for sin, in our place.

God's Word, proclaimed by John, prepared God's way also by pointing them to the Savior. The law can only point out sin, but the gospel points out our Savior. Isaiah prophesied this too: "All mankind will see God's salvation." The Lord came not merely for the Israelite nation and Jews around the Jordan River, but all the nations around the world. Jesus said it himself: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16). Paul makes it clear as well: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23,24). Jesus came for everybody!

Jesus comes for you too. By the grace of God, through Holy Baptism and the preaching of the gospel, the Lord Jesus came to your heart. You received him by faith. The Holy Spirit is the one that gets that credit. Give God the glory, find your joy in Jesus who came to save you and me from all sin, from death and hell, to give us life and heaven!

"Prepare the way for the Lord!" We always need to keep hearing that, including the month of December when so many distractions steer us the wrong way. We need to keep examining our hearts. Hear God's Word, the Law: Is road construction needed? Then repent, turn from the sins, turn back to the Lord. Then hear God's Word, the Gospel: The Lord has come already, and he will come again with his salvation, his rescue plan! Let God's Word prepare God's way in your life, and with Jesus in the driver's seat, enjoy the ride on which he takes you! Amen.