

Advent 2
December 6, 2015

Text: Luke 3:1-6

Theme: Prepare

1. By Repentance
2. See his Salvation

It's a season of preparation. Shopping. Cookie and candy making. Wrapping gifts. Memorizing songs and recitations for the Children's service. There are all sorts of preparations for Christmas. Well it just so happens that one of the themes of Advent is that we prepare for the coming of our Savior. For his birth and for his return. But what does that preparation look like?

We see from John the Baptist that his mission of preparation was a mission of repentance. It's such a hard thing. It's hard because we all have this inborn desire to avoid guilt. It seems to be growing in our culture with the lack of personal accountability and responsibility. Some have called it our culture of victimization. Maybe you heard about the exchange between a student at Oklahoma Wesleyan University, who approached the University President after a chapel recently and said he was offended by the devotion on love because he came to realize that he wasn't showing enough love and the speaker shouldn't have made him or his fellow students feel bad.

Don't tell us what we need to hear, tell us what we want to hear. And on a university campus of all places where students are supposed to learn that which they don't know. That's much the problem that was facing John at the time he began his ministry who was sent to prepare people with a message. Isaiah used a word picture to describe his work when he said of the forerunner of the Savior, **'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'**⁵ **Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.** The kind of preparations that a region or city would make when a king would come to a region. But since Jesus' kingdom is his rule in hearts, John's message of preparation was aimed at the heart.

But this is not always so easy. While it's often easy to see the evil and bad in others it can be hard to see and acknowledge our own because that brings with it those same feelings of guilt and inadequacy. These are the valleys and potholes in our lives that John came to smooth out. These are the crooked places and the rough places. In this prophecy from Isaiah, those were pictures of the harsh condition of our hearts. Preparation to receive the coming Messiah and appreciate the ministry begun at his birth begins with recognizing our deep need for him. We can't look the other way. We can't point the accusing finger of blame and say, it's someone else's fault the way that Adam did to Eve and Eve to the serpent. They were accountable for themselves. We can't claim we were taken advantage, that we're simply victims of the devil's temptations.

No, the solution to our failures, is to accept responsibility and be accountable for our own actions. It's a core value that we try to instill in our children and we expect of our coworkers, yet when it comes to ourselves and our actions before God, too often we'd rather try to hide, excuse or justify it. The action remains and so does the guilt. John came calling to repentance because that's the only way that sin is dealt with. Acknowledge those potholes and valleys and rough places in your life, and then turn from them, seeking God's strength to do so.

But this isn't done with a question of what next or so what. John's message didn't stop with a call to accountability and repentance. Isaiah's prophecy about him continued, **And all mankind will see God's salvation.** Our turning from sin in repentance is not driven by the fear of the law, but the power of the gospel. Why do we celebrate Christmas? Is it just about a baby? Is it just because we needed a reason to take time off and wanted to party? Of course not. That's just the beginning of the story, for wrapped in that baby is salvation for you and for me and for all people.

That's what drives us to repent as we prepare. God, in his complete faithfulness, promises to forgive you your sins. In fact, he already has. He didn't send his Son to see if there were any people that needed rescuing. He didn't send him on a reconnaissance mission to see if there was any sin being committed in the world. For no matter how much

we try to hide and excuse it, our sins are very well known to our God the moment we commit them. He knows that the natural condition of our hearts is only evil all the time. He understands the guilt we bear.

It's for those very reasons that Jesus was sent into this world. That he might actually rescue us from sin. That he might bring salvation. That all peoples of the world might be privileged to hear that message. Amidst all the terror attacks of recent days, there's been a lot of hand wringing and finger wagging and hypothesizing about just what would solve the problem. There is only one solution to a heart bent toward evil and that is the power of God's gospel.

Yesterday at Jim Mowery's funeral the family had placed out on a table the booklet that was handed out at the dedication of this building in 1974. And while I marveled that the only thing that changed about George Lauderdale in those 41 years is his glasses, something else jumped out at me. In the letter from Pastor Kosanke that was included he said that we are building a miracle church. And it's absolutely true that for 41 years miracles have taken place here. Hundreds of babies have been brought to faith through the power of God's gospel in holy baptism. Others have come to know him in faith through his Word proclaimed from the pulpit. The classrooms of our school are incubators for that faith. Worship is a place where week after week we are reassured of his blessing of forgiveness. And year after year God calls home heaven's glory souls who have lived and died in repentance and faith and now have joined the saints in heaven.

God is still working his miracles and he still works his greatest one in the same way he always has. He sent John the Baptist to preach repentance and God's forgiveness. And that's the same message he's entrusted to us today. Within and without, that's the message that changes hearts because hiding from God and rationalizing sin and justifying it in the 21st century don't work. What does solve our problem is God's grace in Jesus our Savior, who washes away those sins and empowers us to live new and holy lives to his glory as we **see his salvation.**