

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

² ...the Word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough ways smooth; ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" ⁷ Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. ⁹ And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." ¹⁰ So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?" ¹¹ He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." ¹² Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" ¹³ And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you." ¹⁴ Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages."

Text: Luke 3:2b-14 A 12-10-17 Isaiah 61 1 John 4:9-16 Psalm 103 Resp. Ps.: 32
Hymns: 712, 63, 75, 87

PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS

Ye sons of men, oh, hearken: your heart and mind prepare;
To hail the Almighty Savior, oh sinners, be your care.
He who of grace alone our Life and Light was given,
The promised Lord from heaven, unto our world is shown.

Prepare the way before Him; prepare for Him the best.
Cast out whatever offendeth this great, this heavenly Guest.
Make straight, make plain, the way: the lowly valleys raising,
The heights of pride abasing, His path all even lay. (TLH #75:1-2)

Dear fellow believers in the Christchild,

God sent John the Baptist to proclaim the wonderful news that the promised Messiah had come! John was God's chosen forerunner to prepare the way for Jesus. This morning as we study John's message, we'll see what a great help it is to us as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth.

Our text begins, "...the Word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness." God gave His Word to John the Baptist. We're told that John traveled all around, "*preaching*" to "*the multitudes*" of people who came to hear him. The word "*preaching*" in the original text is literally "heralding." Like a herald who simply proclaimed the message he was given, John faithfully proclaimed God's Word to the people. Through God's Word John taught the people

about Jesus. Jesus says, “*The Scriptures ... bear witness of Me*” (Jn. 5:39). We prepare for Christmas by hearing and studying God’s Word, which teaches us about the Christ of Christmas. We’re told that John was “*preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.*” “*Baptism*” in the original also means “*washing.*” The Jews of John’s day practiced religious washing of their hands and certain other things, which signified spiritual cleansing. John’s baptism was a picture of being cleansed from sin by God.

John declared, “*Every mountain and hill shall be brought low: and the crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth.*” We don’t prepare our hearts to receive Jesus. Jesus prepares our hearts to receive Him. Using the wording of our text, Jesus “[brings]” us “*low,*” humbling us to see the “*crooked places*” and “*rough ways*” of our sins, and leading us to repent of them. John declared, “*Every valley shall be filled;*” ‘lifting up’ the valleys, so to speak. Jesus lifts us up from our guilt and sorrow over our sins with His forgiveness.

When we’re told that John was “*preaching a baptism of repentance,*” “*repentance*” in the original refers to having a change of heart, turning from our sins, changing our way. Repentance isn’t simply saying that we made some poor choices. Repentance isn’t simply being sorry that we got caught. Repentance isn’t simply being sorry that we have to face the consequences of our wrong doing. God-pleasing repentance is honestly facing up to what we’ve done wrong, confessing it to God, and telling Him we’re sorry. God-pleasing repentance is placing our trust in Jesus to forgive us. God-pleasing repentance is asking Jesus to change our heart and help us to turn away from sinful ways, and live the way He tells us to in His Word. We prepare for Christmas by repenting of our sins.

When we’re told that John was “*preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins,*” “*remission*” in the original is literally, release from bondage or imprisonment, forgiveness, letting our sins go as if they had never been committed. Once when John saw Jesus he exclaimed, “*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (Jn. 1:29), which Jesus did when He died on the cross. In our Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah Jesus said of Himself: “*The Lord*” (His father) “*has anointed Me to preach good tidings..., to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound*” (61:1-2). When we repent of our sins Jesus forgives us. Jesus tells us, “*Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven*” (Mt. 9:2). Through His forgiveness Jesus sets us free from our sin and guilt, and from sin’s power to make us its slave. “*If the Son sets you free,*” Jesus tells us, “*you shall be free indeed*” (Jn. 8:36). We prepare for Christmas by understanding that in God’s gift to us of His Son, we have forgiveness and release from sin’s guilt and power.

We’re told, “[John] said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, ‘*Brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*’” Matthew informs us in his parallel account that John didn’t say this to everyone who came to him. He said it to “*the Pharisees and Sadducees*” who came to him (Mt. 3:7ff.). Unlike others we’re told about who came to John, we hear no acknowledgment of sin and desire to change their ways from the Pharisees and Sadducees. Being baptized by John was just another religious duty in their minds. So John warned them, “*Bear fruits worthy of repentance.... And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*”

Everyone who isn't living by faith in Jesus, living for Jesus, is going to hell. John preached the Law to the Pharisees and Sadducees to show them that they were sinners who were headed for hell, so they could see their need for Jesus to save them. The Bible says that *"God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance"* (2 Pet. 3:9b).

John proclaimed that in Jesus Christ, *"All flesh shall see the salvation of our God."* God sent Jesus to save you and me and everyone else. *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved"* (Jn. 3:16).

After hearing what John told the Pharisees and Sadducees *"the people asked him, ... 'What shall we do then?'"* John proceeded to tell them about fruits of repentance: sharing what we have with those in need, being honest in our dealings with others, treating others well, and the like. Shown our sins by the Law, and shown our forgiveness in Jesus by the Gospel, God works a change of heart in us, moving us and teaching us and enabling us to do what's right. The Bible says that *"[Jesus] gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works"* (Titus 2:14).

We prepare for Christmas by asking God to look into our hearts, show us any sinful ways in ourselves, and lead us to do what is pleasing to Him instead. We pray with the psalmist, *"Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way"* (Ps. 139:23-24).

There are many things we do in preparing for Christmas. Being truly prepared for Christmas isn't something we do. God prepares us for Christmas through His Word that teaches us what Christmas is all about. God prepares us for Christmas by leading us to see our sins, repent of them, and trust in Jesus for our forgiveness. God prepares us for Christmas through the gift of His Son who changes us so that we give ourselves and our lives to Him. "Heavenly Father, prepare us for Christmas."

The humble heart and lowly God lifteth up on high;
Beneath His feet in anguish the haughty soul shall lie.
The heart, sincere and right, that heeds God's invitation
And makes true preparation, it is the Lord's delight.

Prepare my heart, Lord Jesus, turn not from me aside,
And grant that I receive Thee this blessed Adventide.
From stall and manger low come Thou to dwell within me;
Loud praises will I sing Thee and forth Thy glory show. Amen.
(TLH #75:3-4)