

“May you be on His right!” Luke 3:1-6

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.””

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’ (Matt 25:31-34)

“The kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world!”

He is coming. This is what will happen. There is no way around it. There is no way out of it. This is what we all will face. The Son of Man in His glory. This is the time of the Church year when we meditate on the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

How to prepare for that day? Those fellow saints who came before us have chosen for this Sunday reading from Luke 3. The ministry of John the Baptist. And Luke relates to us exactly what we need to hear and remember. Let’s see!

What was John proclaiming? **“A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”** Repentance and forgiveness of sins. Do you remember, what was the message of the Old Testament prophets? Return to the Lord! In other words - repent! Repent and receive His forgiveness and restoration.

How did Jesus begin His ministry? What did He preach? Repent and believe the Gospel. How did He explain the Biblical message to His disciples? **“Repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations.”** (Luke 24:47)

How did the apostles begin their ministry? Repent so that you can receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit! And by the way, how did Dr Luther

begin his famous 95 theses? “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” (Mt 4:17), He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

Now, how to prepare for the coming of the Lord Jesus? The message of the great choir of God’s faithful servants is quite clear: “Repent and believe the Good News!” Let me ask you, which one of these do we tend to gravitate to?

Repentance or the Good News? What news do we want to hear? What do the fallen human beings naturally want to hear? That we are good. We are just fine. We are okay. Good enough. Accepted. Recognized. There are many ways this is being proclaimed.

“You are good and precious as you are.” “Just be your authentic self.” “God loves you and accepts you as you are.” No one wants to hear the opposite; **“none is righteous, no, not one; all have turned aside and have become worthless.”** (Rom 3:11-12) Our twisted hearts will do anything to convince us that we are just fine.

One of the easiest ways to elevate ourselves is to compare ourselves with others. “Thanks God that I am not like them!” “Thanks God that I don’t act or don’t speak or don’t think like they do!” We see this quite vividly in our current situation as well.

“Thanks God we are not like those false teachers who push to change the Biblical teaching!” “Thanks God we are not like those self-righteous and unloving people who only want to divide the church!” “Thanks God we are not like them!”

Those statements may be true, there are false teachers, sure, there are unloving people who want to divide, sure, and there is time to say it clearly. But the point is this. Where do we look when we make those statements? “Thanks God I am not like those others!”

Is that how we repent? Are those the Good News? None of those! Remember where we have heard these words? Luke 18. Two men in the temple. A Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee exclaimed: **“God, I thank you that I am not like other men!”**

What did the tax collector say? **“Standing far off, [he] would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!””** What did Jesus say? **“I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the first. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”**

So, how to prepare for the day of the Lord? It begins with “repent!”. Okay, now we know the answer. Let’s do this? Shall we? But... Do you see the problem? How do we do that? How would that work? Is this something we just get ourselves together and do?

There is something we need to know about repentance. John the Baptist in his proclamation quotes from Isaiah the prophet: **“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” What is he talking about? Remember he is proclaiming repentance. What picture is he painting? **“Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low... the crooked shall become straight... the rough places shall become level ways.”** Isaiah and John are speaking about preparing our hearts. If this is a picture of our repentance, think about the magnitude of this task! Who could do something like that?!

Such a task is well beyond us. Then who could accomplish the task of such magnitude? The One who has enough power and grace to do that? You know who. Our Triune God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We cannot prepare our hearts on our own. Our hearts are so twisted, we can't even understand them. It is our God who in His grace comes to us and speaks to us. He knows our condition. His heart breaks seeing us enslaved to our sin, devil and death.

He goes to incredible lengths for us, He wants us to know the truth. About ourselves, about Him, the one true God, about our dreadful situation and what is coming at the end of this age, and about what He has done for us. For you!

Our God prepares our hearts as He speaks to us. It doesn't help much if we simply hear the command “repent!” We need to hear God's voice, His holy and unchangeable will God for our lives, what our sinful condition is, and who will not make it to the New Heavens and New Earth. We need to hear God's law clearly. His Commandments. All the “you shall” and “you shall not”! We need to hear His warnings, there are many.

There is an interesting one in the book of Revelation. **“But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”** (Rev 21:8)

Interesting list, isn't it? Some seem obvious. Murderers. Sexually immoral. In thoughts and words and deeds. Sorcerers, engaging with evil spirits. Idolaters, trusting in elements of God's creation instead of the Creator.

But the very first on this list is **“the cowardly”**. Those who know what is right and wrong, but don't fight for it, who keep silent, who turn away, out of fear from people, wanting to please people more than God. In our society that can be summarized as “be nice and don't offend anyone”. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it so well: “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”

And the one that concludes the list is **“all liars”**, those who twist and distort the truth to suit their agendas. Commentators suggest that this also refers to those in Christian community who bring in false teachings that gradually weaken and destroy our faith.

God speaks these warnings to us. Loudly and clearly. It is because of His grace that He does this, to prepare our hearts for His coming. As Jesus said: **“Those who are well [who think they are well] have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”** (Mark 2:17)

Blessed you are if the Word of God reveals to you your sin, if it brings it to light, even as it may make us angry. It means the Lord has not given up on you. He cares for you; He straightens what is crooked in your heart and restores it with His Word and Spirit.

He prepares **“the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.”** It is our gracious God who leads us to repentance. And once we respond to His call, once we turn around, He does not expect us to walk the whole way back to find Him. He comes to us.

No, He actually doesn't! He is your Prodigal Father, prodigal in His grace. He runs towards you. Runs! He feels compassion towards you. He throws His arms around you. He embraces you. He kisses you. He welcomes you as His dear child. Overjoyed He brings you home and throws a huge feast because He has regained you.

That is how our God greets those who turn to Him. And then, at the end of this age **“all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”** Yes, all the flesh will see God's salvation, the renewal and restoration of His entire creation. But only those on the right hand will inherit the Kingdom prepared from them. Repent and believe the Good News!

I pray for you, dear brothers and sisters, that for you this Advent season could be colored with joyful repentance, as our Lord Himself speaks to you and prepares your hearts. So that we don't need to deceive or falsely boost ourselves about our moral goodness, that we don't need to justify ourselves by blaming or putting down others.

That the Spirit of God guides us as we **“beat our breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”**” So that our peace and goodness and hope are firmly grounded in the One, who has taken every mountain and hill of our sins on His shoulder.

In our Lord Jesus who has taken our every act of cowardice, murder, sexual immorality and idolatry in thoughts, words and deeds, every one of our lies and has nailed them all to the cross in His innocent body. They are all gone. Forgiven and forgotten.

I pray that now you boldly live in Him who has walked through the valley of the death on our behalf and whose Spirit works tirelessly to make sure that our crooked hearts are straight, so that you can greet His return with joy and when that time comes, **“receive the Kingdom that was prepared for you [!] from the foundation of the world.”**

May you be among those on His right! By God's grace.

Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit!

Amen.