

**STIR UP OUR HEARTS, O LORD, TO MAKE READY THE WAY OF YOUR ONLY SON****Sermon for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent, 2018****Luke 3:1-20**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the Gospel read before, Luke 3:1-20: <sup>1</sup> **In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, while Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea, while Herod was the tetrarch of Galilee, while his brother Philip was the tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis and while Lysanias was the tetrarch of Abilene, <sup>2</sup> and at the time when Annas and Caiaphas were the Chief Priests, the Word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> He went into all the country around the Jordan and preached that people should repent and be baptised for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>4</sup> It was as Scripture has said in the book of the Words of the prophet Isaiah: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord! Make His paths straight! <sup>5</sup> Every ravine will be filled in. Every mountain and hill will be levelled. The crooked roads will be made straight, and the rough roads smooth, <sup>6</sup> and all people will see the salvation of God.’”**

<sup>7</sup> **Therefore, John kept saying to the crowds who were coming out to be baptised by him, “You brood of poisonous snakes, who has warned you to run away from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup> Therefore, produce fruits worthy of repentance! Do not begin to tell yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’! For I tell you that God can raise children for Abraham from these stones. <sup>9</sup> The axe has already been laid at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”**

<sup>10</sup> **The crowds used to ask him, “Therefore, what are we to do?”**

<sup>11</sup> **He used to answer them, “The person who has two tunics should share with the person who has none, and the person who has food should do the same!”**

<sup>12</sup> **Tax-collectors also came to be baptised and asked him, “Teacher, what are we to do?”**

<sup>13</sup> **He told them, “Stop collecting any more money than what has been laid down for you!”**

<sup>14</sup> **Soldiers also used to ask him, “What are we also to do?”**

**He told them, “Do not extort money by violence, do not accuse people falsely and be satisfied with your wages!”**

<sup>15</sup> **The people were expecting something and were all wondering in their hearts whether John might perhaps be the Christ. <sup>16</sup> John answered them all: “I am baptising you with water. However, the One who is more powerful than I am is coming. I am not worthy to untie His sandal-strap. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. <sup>17</sup> He has His winnowing fork in His hand to clean up His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn but will burn the chaff with fire that cannot be put out.”**

<sup>18</sup> **So, with many other words John kept exhorting the people and telling them the Good News.**

<sup>19</sup> **However, when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, <sup>20</sup> Herod added this to them all: he locked John up in prison.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

**“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord! Make His paths straight! <sup>5</sup> Every ravine will be filled in. Every mountain and hill will be levelled. The crooked roads will be made straight, and the rough roads smooth, <sup>6</sup> and all people will see the salvation of God.’”** With these words John the Baptist warned and prepared the people, both Jew and Gentile, for the coming of the Christ.

John was a preacher of *repentance*. The word repent is used in two senses in the Bible. Sometimes the word means only “*to be sorry for sins*.” An example of this use is the summary of Jesus’ message: “*Repent and believe in the Good News!*” (Mark 1:15). John’s preaching of repentance included the call to faith in the coming Saviour. This is evident from Luke’s statement that **John kept exhorting the people and telling them the Good News**. Response to John’s preaching of repentance included both sorrow for sins and faith in the good news of forgiveness of sins.

John did not only preach; John also baptised (hence the designation “John the Baptist”). His was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The people who were baptised made confession of their sins.<sup>1</sup> The Word of God that came to John no doubt included the command to baptise. This was an added means by which John made ready the way for the coming of Jesus. John recognised that his baptism was only preparation for what was to come: “**I am baptising you with**

<sup>1</sup> See Matthew 3:6

**water. However, the One who is more powerful than I am is coming.... He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”** John’s baptism was an effective means of grace for the forgiveness of sins, but it was only preparatory for the baptism of Jesus that would follow.

Today, as we move closer to Christmas, the world gets ready for this season on one level, Christians on another. The world gets ready for just one great big blockbuster of a day on Christmas, kind of an annual consumer feeding frenzy, indulging itself in stuff and more stuff. Then when it’s over, it’s over. All that’s left of Christmas on December 26 is a big pile of wrapping paper and trips back to the shops for the annual Boxing Day sales.

Not so in the Church. For us, when Christmas comes, it stays. It lingers on through Epiphany, the Gentiles’ Christmas, and all the way clear through till Lent. We continue to ponder the great glad news that God has become man to redeem all humankind out from under the iron grip of death and hell. We make Christmas last.

But Christmas hasn’t yet begun; we’re still in Advent. We’re still getting ready. Yet our readiness is much more than just sending cards and decorating our homes and going to parties. It is a readiness of the heart that God desires at His coming. That’s why earlier in our Collect we prayed: *Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only Son*.

In our text, God gives us exactly that: a ready heart, through the prophet John. He is the very prophet whom the Lord appointed to **prepare the way of the Lord**. And he did just that. John did not hold back. There was no tiptoeing around for him. He marched right in where angels feared to tread and laid it on the line to all who heard him: “**9 The axe has already been laid at the root of the trees,**” he announced. All the dead wood was to be cut out of the Lord’s forest. “**Therefore, every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**”

Now that’s a little unsettling, if we have the ears to hear it - and it should be. The sad truth is that more often than not, you and I don’t produce the good fruit our Lord expects. We simply don’t love God with all our heart and soul and strength, much less love our neighbour as ourselves.<sup>2</sup> Despite our best efforts, there are those we have hurt and those we have failed to help. Our thoughts and desires are soiled with sin. We hold grudges. There is nothing good within us, in our sinful nature.

That’s how preparing the way for the Lord’s coming begins, when you and I are laid low by the hammer blows of God’s Law, so that we may be lifted up and comforted by the Gospel of God’s grace in Christ Jesus, His Son. The way of the Lord is the way of repentance. That is, *it calls for change*. A change of mind and heart, which only God can work within us by the power of His Spirit working through His Word.

That’s what we need this Advent season: a change so that we can straighten up - straighten up our hearts and lives, clean out our messed-up hearts so cluttered with sin, and clear out our lives, littered with shame and death, so that they instead will be filled to overflowing with the life of Jesus Christ.

Not that such a change comes easy, mind you. It means the death of the habits of the sinful heart, and such habits always die hard. It’s always much easier to love and serve ourselves than it is to love and serve God and our neighbour for Jesus’ sake. It always comes naturally to the sinful heart to lash out with anger when we’re hurt, to return evil for evil, to repay injury with injury. It is much easier to cut down other people than to love them and build them up. It’s easier for the sinful heart to curse and swear, to lie and deceive by God’s name, than to pray, praise, and give Him thanks. That’s why the way of the Lord leads first to the cross before it leads to joy. That’s why the Christian life is a life of constant repentance, a continuing vigil for change in mind and heart. Luther’s first of his 95 theses state: *When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” (Matt. 4:17), He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance*. We confess our sins, then God “*is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness,*” (1 John 1:9). First the cross and then the crown. Such is the way, the road, we walk.

And that road often takes some unexpected twists and turns. It might take us through some rocky terrain and rugged territory, places we would rather not go. The road of faith may lead us out even into desert lands, where it seems we walk alone all by ourselves.

But we are not alone even there. The very God who washed away our sins and has given us life will not abandon us in those desert times. He who has given up His own life for us on His cross and shed His blood to wash our robes and make them white will never let us go. In chapter 10 of John’s Gospel, that marvellous chapter where Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd, He says, “*My sheep listen to My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me,* <sup>28</sup> *and I give them eternal life, and they will certainly not be lost, and no one will snatch them out of My hand,*” (John 10:27-28). The relationship between Jesus and His followers is intimate, personal. And because He is the Christ, the Son of God, the relationship is eternal. He gives His sheep eternal life. They will not perish forever. No one will snatch them out of His hand.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 22:37-39

At times the path you walk might seem rugged and very steep, the pathway long and hard, but it is the path of the Lord's own coming. The voice of John, the Lord's prophet, cries out to one and all: **'Prepare the way of the Lord! Make His paths straight! <sup>5</sup> Every ravine will be filled in. Every mountain and hill will be levelled. The crooked roads will be made straight, and the rough roads smooth, <sup>6</sup> and all people will see the salvation of God.'**

So, let's stir up our hearts this Advent season. It's time for a change, a new way. Let's lift up the valleys of our deep despair, bring down the mountain peaks of our lofty pride, and straighten out our crooked ways, and if anyone asks "How is this done? What does this mean?" let me tell you:

What this means for you I cannot tell. It means different things for different people, depending on who they are and where they are in life. You can tell that from John's instructions to those who heard his preaching. For tax collectors, the way of the Lord meant to be honest. John **told them, "Stop collecting any more money than what has been laid down for you!"** For soldiers **he told them, "Do not extort money by violence, do not accuse people falsely and be satisfied with your wages!"** For everyone, it meant generosity and mercy. John told the crowd, **"The person who has two tunics should share with the person who has none, and the person who has food should do the same!"** But how is this done? That I can most certainly tell you: by the grace of God, that's how.

The Son of God, who has come down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, will change your hearts and make them new. He who left the Father's throne in lowly meekness to be cradled in a cattle trough and wrapped in swaddling clothes is closer in His Word to you than your little child with his arms wrapped around your neck.

This Lord Jesus will sweep the cobwebs out of our hearts and make them fit for His coming. He will straighten up the crooked paths by which we have wandered far away from our Father's house and bring us home again. He will tear down our stubborn pride and melt our hardened hearts to enfold us in His love. He will lift us up out of the pits of our despair and grief to comfort us with the presence of His Holy Spirit and restore to us the joy of His salvation.

So, get ready. Get ready for Christmas most certainly, but above all else prepare your hearts for the coming of Christ. Let this holy Advent season be your comfort and your joy as deep within takes root the reality that Christ has actually come in the flesh and will come again at the end of time. In the meantime, He comes in His Gospel and Sacrament to make you new, whole and free.

Prepare the way for His coming. Let this be your constant Advent prayer: *"Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only Son."* Come, Lord Jesus, quickly come. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

#### PRAYER FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Lord God, we praise You that You reckon us as blameless in Your sight because of Jesus' obedience for us. We praise You for Your commandments, so that we may love with right knowledge, and for the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We ask You to bless all who preach, teach, read, and study Your Word, that more and more people may know the Gospel message of joy and hope.

Refine our hearts, so that we may prepare a smooth way for the Lord in them. Give us stronger faith, joy and confidence, and grant that we may abound in hope through the power of the Holy Spirit. Enable us to trust You firmly, to worship You with pure hearts, to serve You with clean hands, to obey You with willing minds, and to love You with our whole beings.

Guard us, that Satan, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us, or lead us into error, unbelief, and sin. Do not let us lose the inheritance that You have graciously promised to those who know You in faith. Teach us to watch and pray at all times. We praise You that You have enabled us to stand with joy and confidence before the Son of Man when He comes in glory to judge the living and the dead. Therefore send us Your Spirit so that we strive to be blameless in our love for each other, to grow in it, and to practise it with sensitivity and insight.

Rid Your church of that all that is divisive, evil, and wrong, that all who profess Your name may serve You in truth, purity, and loyal devotion.

Give peace and stability to the nations on earth. Put down all evil rulers, and raise up leaders who will rule and serve us according to Your good pleasure.

May Jesus rule in the hearts of all parents and children. Supply the spiritual needs of all families, so that truth, love, and high morals may bless our homes.

Be with all people everywhere, in all situations and circumstances of life. Give healing to the sick, comfort to the sorrowing, guidance to the young, hope to the aged, comfort to the bereaved, and wisdom to the perplexed.

Lead us to continue to look to Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. Help us to wait in joyful hope for His second Coming, when He will receive us, and all others who believe in Him, into Your eternal presence. This we pray in His holy name. Amen.

## 2 Advent

Malachi 3:1-7b

<sup>1</sup> “Look! I am sending My messenger, and he will make the way clear ahead of Me. Then the Lord, for whom you are looking, will suddenly come to His Temple, yes, the Messenger of the covenant, whom you desire. Look! He is coming,” the LORD of hosts has said.

<sup>2</sup> However, who will endure the day of His coming? Who can stand on the day when He appears? For He will be like a refiner’s fire and like launderers’ soap. <sup>3</sup> He will sit down like a refiner and a purifier of silver, purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. Then they will present an offering to the LORD in righteousness. <sup>4</sup> Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of long ago, as in former years.

<sup>5</sup> “Then I shall come near to you to judge you. I shall be quick to testify against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear to a lie, against those who defraud hired men of their wages, against those who exploit widows and orphans, against those who take away the rights of resident-foreigners and do not fear Me,” the LORD of hosts has said. <sup>6</sup> “For I, the LORD, have not changed. That is why you, O children of Jacob, have not come to an end. <sup>7</sup> Since the times of your fathers you have been turning away from My Prescriptions and have not been keeping them. Return to Me, and I shall return to you!” the LORD of hosts has said.

Philippians 1:2-11

<sup>2</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup> I thank my God every time I remember you. <sup>4</sup> Every time I pray for all of you I always make my prayer with joy, <sup>5</sup> because of your partnership in the Good News from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup> I am sure of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will carry it on to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus. <sup>7</sup> It is right for me to think like this about all of you, because, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the Good News, I have you in my heart, as people who are all partners in God’s grace with me. <sup>8</sup> For God is my witness how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. <sup>9</sup> I also pray that your love will overflow still more and more in knowledge and in all insight, <sup>10</sup> that you may approve the things that are best, that you may be pure and without blame until the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Luke 3:1-20

<sup>1</sup> In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, while Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea, while Herod was the tetrarch of Galilee, while his brother Philip was the tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis and while Lysanias was the tetrarch of Abilene, <sup>2</sup> and at the time when Annas and Caiaphas were the Chief Priests, the Word of

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<sup>19</sup> However, when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, <sup>20</sup> Herod added this to them all: he locked John up in prison.