

December 5, 2021
Second Sunday in Advent
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Luke 3:1-14; Malachi 3:1-7

PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD!

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Our text for meditation today comes from the Gospel according to St Luke, the 3rd chapter, which you heard read earlier.

In St Luke's Gospel, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Luke provides the world a historical record of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. (cf: Luke 1:1–4) What he writes is no fairy tale or fable. In the first two verses of our text this morning, he gives us all the information needed to locate where and when our Lord's prophesy was fulfilled in John, the son of Zechariah.

Four hundred years earlier, God spoke through His prophet Malachi, saying:

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.”
(Malachi 3:1)

Malachi foretold that this messenger would be great like Elijah and would come:

“... before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.” (Malachi 4:5)

... which we know as the Last Day. But then, the prophets went silent. As the years went by, Israel would come under the rule of the Persians, and then the Greeks, and then the Maccabees, and then the Romans. If you were an Israelite at that time, it probably seemed as if God had forgotten or abandoned you. But, He had not. The Lord took care of His chosen people. He kept His Word and promise. And He did so in silence.

When the fullness of time had come, the Lord God's four-hundred-year silence came to an end. Malachi's prophesy was fulfilled when the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. John came as a prophet, God's messenger, as a bridge between the ***old covenant*** and the ***new***. He looked like a prophet, dressed just like Elijah. (cf: 2 Kings 1:8; Matthew 3:4; Mark 1:6) He sounded like a prophet fulfilling the words of Isaiah:

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” (Luke 3:4)

John stood in between the ***old*** and the ***new***, between ***prophesy*** and its ***fulfillment***. He was sent for one purpose: to prepare the way for the Messenger of the ***new covenant***, (cf: Malachi 3:1) the Messiah, Christ Jesus. As the last of Israel's prophets, He went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming something new: a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (cf: Luke 3:3) Under the ***old covenant***, the guilt of sin was covered by the blood of animals. The animal's

life in place of your own. Under the *new covenant*, the stain and guilt of sin is covered and made white by the unrepeatable once for all time sacrifice of Jesus' body on Calvary's cross. (cf: Romans 6:10) It is Jesus' life in place of your own.

John's message of preparation was the same as proclaimed by God's prophets who had gone before him and it's the same message preached by Jesus' apostles and His called servants of the Word ever since. The message can be summarized in one word: repent. (cf: Matthew 3:2) Repent and abandon your sinful ways of thinking and acting – and – hold fast to every Word that flows from the mouth of God. (cf: Matthew 4:4) Repent and turn your heart from your self-righteous confidence in self and treasure and trust alone in the Triune God. Repent and flee from your sinful passions and pleasures – and cling to the Messiah and His *new covenant*.

The crowds of people that came to John to be baptized were no different than you and me and sinners of every stripe who are easily deceived by the devil's lies. Perhaps you are like the self-confident people listening to John. They believed that their status before God, as Abraham's children, secured their complete salvation. Maybe you believe your status will save you. Many believers today are led astray into believing that contrition and repentance are unnecessary. Others are led to believe that they have no need to bear fruits of repentance by their works and deeds.

John makes clear that judgment awaits all who are unrepentant. The axe is already at the root of the tree. Those who do not bear good fruit will be cut down and cast into the fire. Christ Himself comes as the Judge, with a winnowing fork in his hand. On the Last Day He will clear the threshing floor and throw the chaff, that is, all who lack fruits of repentance, into the unquenchable fires of hell. (cf: Luke 3:17)

The prophet Malachi prophesied of that Day saying:

“... who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap.” (Malachi 3:2)

Malachi uses the imagery of fire and soap to describe the Lord who is our righteous Judge. On judgment day, no one can stand or endure. Scripture teaches us that we are all guilty of sin. You are precious metal. Your sin has you polluted with all kinds of impurities, slag, and dirt. Our Lord is like a refiner's fire who melts the precious metal so that the pure metal separates from the impurities. The repentant, He allows to be cleansed by the fire of trials and tribulations which purify, sanctify, and make you holy. The impenitent, He will cast out of His Kingdom.

You are a fleece of wool. Your sin-stained flesh is permanently discolored and unclean, in desperate need of the fuller's soap. The Fuller was the man who would process wool. He had a strong soap made of lye to clean the wool and make it white so that it could be made into beautiful clean clothing. (cf: Hatton, A Handbook on Malachi, 433)

Because of the sin that is woven within the very fabric of your being, you are dirty wool, permanently soiled and stained. But Jesus is both the *fuller* and the *soap*. He takes the dirty and stained flesh of the faithful and makes them clean. His soap is His precious blood which He shed

on the cross. With His blood He cleanses you from your sorrows, your transgression, your guilt, and your shame.

Many thought John *might* be the Messiah, but he made it clear that he was merely the *herald* of the *new covenant*, preparing the way. He baptized the people with water, but promised that the One to come was mightier than He and would Baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. (cf: Luke 3:15–16) John prepared the way. He was the forerunner, standing in between the *old* and the *new*, between *prophesy* and its *fulfillment*. And when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, (Galatians 4:4) as Savior to deliver the repentant from their sins.

Jesus' Baptism by John marked the beginning of His earthly ministry of salvation, for which the *old covenant* had prepared. On the cross, Christ our Judge underwent judgment for all, fulfilling God's will of salvation, so that in Him all might be forgiven. In your Baptism, He bestows upon you all His gifts won on the cross: namely forgiveness of sins, rescue from death and the devil, and eternal salvation for all who believe.

This and every Advent season, we prepare for the coming of our Lord. When you attempt to prepare on your own, you will always fall short. There is nothing you can do to make yourself acceptable before the Lord. As in John's day, all who are fully prepared for His coming show fruits of repentance in their lives as the result of God's work in them. (cf: Luke 3:10-14) The greatest fruit of repentance is to be prepared for Christ when He comes again, and this begins by listening to the whole council of God's Word, the preaching of John, the prophets, and all the apostles, and turning in repentance, trusting in your baptismal promises bestowed by Christ at the font.

True repentance and forgiveness always lead to concrete actions of love toward others flowing from the love of Him who first loved you. John gives specific examples to the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers. You bear visible fruits of your repentance in the giving of your tithes, offerings, and your good works and deeds according to your station in life, serving others as if you are serving the Lord.

St James says that:

“... faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. ¹⁸ But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” (James 2:17–18)

The truly repentant produce these fruits. Not because of their own power but because Baptism and the forgiveness of sins empower the believer to do deeds of mercy toward others.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness has a message that is still pertinent – even today. His message is simple: repent and bear fruits of repentance. Repentance is more than simply feeling sorrow and remorse. True repentance is seeking a Godly alternative to sinful living. It is allowing the Holy Spirit to create a clean heart within you. Repent and flee from your sinful passions and pleasures – and cling to the Messiah and His new covenant.

Malachi prophesied of it. John the Baptist prepared the way for it. And Jesus delivered it. It is the *new covenant* by which you and all believers are saved. Christ is both the *messenger of the covenant* and the *Messiah* who fulfills it. It is the *new covenant*, sealed with Christ's holy, precious blood, which he poured out for you for the forgiveness of your sins; the *new covenant*, in which God remembers your sins no more; the *covenant* God made with you in baptismal waters. On the Last Day, God's judgment will be swift against the unrepentant and they'll be thrown into the fire. Because of Old Adam's sinful nature, no one will stand and endure on Judgment Day. At least, not on your own.

It is no fairy tale or fable. It is a fact that you, brothers and sisters in Christ, have an advocate with the Father. (cf: 1 John 2:1-2) You have been and continually are purified by the fire of the Refiner – that is the trials and tribulations of this life. You have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb of God and have been declared not guilty of your sins. All who trust in Christ Jesus for forgiveness and salvation will be found pure and blameless on the day of Christ. (cf: Philippians 1:10) For the sake of Jesus suffering and death on your behalf, God has begun a good work in you. And in the words of St Paul:

“... he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:6)

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