

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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PREPARE THE WAY

Luke 3:1-18

Reader's Digest magazine used to have a regular feature called "My Most Unforgettable Character." Surely one of the most unforgettable characters in the Bible is John the Baptist. Without a doubt, he is one of the most fascinating figures in a Bible full of fascinating characters. John was the late-in-life, only son of a Jewish priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, who was a cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus. You can read about the birth of John and the events leading up to it in Luke 1.

John's appearance and lifestyle were both out of the ordinary. He lived out in the wilderness by himself. His wardrobe was strange – he dressed in clothing made of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist (Mark 1:6). His diet was unusual, too. He ate locusts and wild honey (Mark 1:6). He drank no wine or other adult beverages (Luke 1:15). But from birth the hand of God was upon him. From before his birth he was set apart for God's service (Luke 1:16-17). From his birth God's Spirit was upon him, preparing him for the work God had prepared for him to do. His mission in life was to prepare the way for the Lord (Luke 3:4), to make ready a people prepared for the coming of the Lord (Luke 1:17).

One thing that impresses me about John is that he had a clear sense of who he was, and who – or what – he was not. When the religious leaders in Jerusalem heard about John and what he was doing – preaching a message of repentance and baptizing people in the Jordan River (hence the name, John the Baptist) – they sent a delegation from Jerusalem to check him out. They went out to investigate the reports they had heard about him. They wanted to know who he was and why he was doing what he was doing. And they didn't beat around the bush. They got right to the point. They said: "Who are you? Are you the promised Messiah? Are you the Christ? Are you the One we've been waiting for?"

John answered them directly. He left no room for speculation or misinterpretation. In John 1:20 (written by the apostle John, the brother of James and son of Zebedee, not to be confused with John the Baptist), he said: "I am not the Christ."

"Then who are you?" they wanted to know. "Are you Elijah (whose coming was foretold in Malachi 4:5-6)? Are you the Prophet (whose coming was foretold by Moses in Deuteronomy 18)?"

Again John said: "No, I am not."

"Then who are you? They asked. "What do you say about yourself?"

John's answer was essentially this: "I'm just a man doing what God has called me to do. I am a voice crying in the wilderness: 'Get ready to meet the Lord, because He is coming!' I am here to prepare the way for Him. If you think there is something different or special about me, you haven't seen anything yet. The One coming after me – the promised Messiah, the long-awaited Savior – is so great that I am not worthy even to be His slave" (John 1:23-27; cf. Luke 3:16).

John, you see, knew who he was and who he was not. And he understood the purpose of his life. He knew he had been sent from God and that he was a man on a mission.

He was not the Messiah. He was not the One who would baptize His followers with the Holy Spirit and with God's refining fire (Luke 3:16-17). He was not the eternal Word of God who became incarnate and came to live among us and even to die for us. John was not the light of the world that shines in the darkness (John 1:4-8). That wasn't John. It was Jesus.

The Bible tells us that John came not as the light but as a witness to the light. Not as the Word but as a witness to the Word. Not to call attention to himself but to point people to Jesus. Not to make a name for himself but to prepare the way for the coming of the Savior.

The purpose of John's life – a purpose he embraced with joy and fulfilled with gusto – was to point beyond himself to the Messiah, so that people would recognize *Jesus* for who He was, believe in *Him*, and follow *Him*. His God-given mission as the forerunner of the Messiah was to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord and then to point people to the Messiah – to Jesus – when He came. His job was to prepare the people of Israel for the coming of the long-awaited Messiah, and then to present the Messiah to them. Which is exactly what he did.

In the ancient world, when a king was planning to visit some part of his kingdom, he would send a messenger ahead of him to tell the people to prepare the roads for the king's impending visit. John came as the messenger of the King. He carried out the prophetic words of Isaiah, who spoke in Isaiah 40 of "a voice calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" John came to prepare the way for the Lord. But the preparation he called for was not the preparation of the roads but the preparation of the hearts and lives of the people.

The message of John's life and ministry was two-fold. First, it was a message of *preparation*, as he urged the people to get ready, to prepare their hearts for the coming of the Savior. To prepare their hearts, John proclaimed a message of *metanoia*, a call to repentance. This *metanoia* or repentance involves a change of direction in life. It involves a turning away from sin, a turning away from self as the ordering principle in life, and a turning to God. It involves both a sorrow for sin and a fundamental change of one's mind and heart and conduct. John warned that God's wrath, His holy anger and righteous judgment would fall on those who refuse to repent and continue to live in rebellion against God and His ways. But the result of repentance, John said, is the

forgiveness of sins. Those who turn from their sins in humility and sorrow, and turn to God in surrender and trust, receive from God forgiveness and freedom from guilt. That was good news in the days of John, and it is still good news today. Forgiveness is available today for anyone and everyone who turns from their sin in humble repentance and turns to God in trusting faith. It is available for you. It is available for me. No matter what our sin(s) may be.

But repentance, John said, has to be followed by fruit. In Luke 3:8 he said to the crowds who came out to him to be baptized: “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” Our lives, in other words, must demonstrate the genuineness of our repentance. If there is a change in your heart – on the interior, it should be evident in a change in your conduct – on the exterior. True repentance results not only in forgiveness but in the fruit of godly living. Forgiveness is not a license to go on sinning – in attitude, action or word.

John’s message, then, was a message of preparation, the preparation of our hearts and lives to welcome and receive the Lord.

Second, it was a message of *presentation*, as he identified and introduced Jesus as the Messiah. In John 1:29 and again in 1:36, John identified Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” In John 1:34, he said of Jesus: “I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.” John recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah, the promised Savior, God in flesh and blood, who would give His own life as a sacrifice to pay for the sin of the whole world – for your sin and mine and the sin of everyone who believes in Him.

To prepare the way for Jesus and to point people to Jesus so they would believe in Him and follow Him was the purpose of John’s life. It is what he was made for.

Now, let’s fast-forward to today. How can we apply the lessons of John’s message and ministry to our lives? Specifically, how can we “prepare the way for the Lord” this Advent season? Let me suggest four ways.

1. EXAMINE YOUR HEART

The first thing each of us can do is to examine our hearts in the light of John’s call to repentance. If you want to prepare the way for the Lord and to make your heart ready to celebrate His first coming at Christmas, take time to examine your heart. Repent of all known sin in your life and ask God for His help to lead a holy life. A life that honors Him.

A particular church found it necessary to discipline a man by removing him from membership as a result of repeated and unrepentant adultery. They followed the guidelines of Matthew 18, and the man’s response was: “I know what I’m doing. I know what you have to do. So do what you have to do, because I don’t care! I plan never to darken the doors of this church again anyway. So why should I care?” He proceeded to divorce his wife in civil court.

His wife continued to attend church, and the church continued to pray that God would do whatever was necessary to open this man's eyes and bring him to repentance.

About two years later, the man called the pastor of the church and asked if they could meet. When they met, he began to weep and said he wanted to confess his sin. He said the "Hound of Heaven" had been on his trail for nearly two years, and he couldn't take much more. He set aside his divorce and sought to renew his marriage. Even his wife, who had said she could probably never trust him again, was amazed at the change in his life.

This man was in the Army Reserves, and his unit had been sent overseas to process the bodies of members of our military who died in Iraq, and to prepare them for their return to the States. God used this experience to work in his life as he was confronted daily with the brevity of life and the permanence of eternity. When he returned home after his tour of duty, he met with the elders of the church, confessed his sin, and asked to be forgiven for his sin against his wife and for the impact his life had had on the church.

In His providence, God used the circumstances in this man's life to cause him to examine his heart and to repent of his sin. And, in this case, the whole church got to see and to rejoice in God's work of restoring both the man and his marriage.

Maybe there is nothing in your life that compares to the story I've just told you. Praise God if that is the case! Praise God, too, for the Hound of Heaven who will not allow us to be content in our sins. Whether our sins are big or small, each of us daily falls short of God's standard in our thoughts, our attitudes, our actions and words. There is no better time than today to examine your heart, to ask God to reveal your sin to you, and to repent of every known sin in your life before the face of God, who is merciful and compassionate, and ready at every moment to forgive our sins. A friend of mine named Kerry Skinner (a classmate in my Doctor of Ministry program) wrote a book entitled *The Joy of Repentance*. The joy of repentance comes in receiving forgiveness and in being reconciled to God and one another.

To prepare the way for the Lord and to make your heart ready for Christmas, examine your heart and turn from any known sin in your life.

2. PRODUCE THE FRUIT OF REPENTANCE

When confronted with their sin and the impending judgment of God, the people asked John the Baptist: "What should we do?"

In verses 12 and 13, we see that to the tax collectors who came to him, John said they should be honest in their dealings with others. He told them not to cheat people but to treat them fairly.

In verse 14, he told the soldiers to treat people with respect. He told them not to abuse their power or authority by extorting money. He told them not to make false accusations against anyone and to be content with the pay they were receiving.

In verse 11, talking to the crowd in general, he told them to be generous with what they have and to share with those in need around them.

Before he became a Christian, Lee Strobel was a reporter for the Chicago Tribune newspaper. He was given the assignment of reporting on the struggles of an impoverished, inner-city family during the weeks leading up to Christmas. He discovered that this family – 60-year-old Perfecta Delgado and her granddaughters Lydia and Jenny – had been burned out of their roach-infested tenement and were living in a tiny, two-room apartment with no furniture or rugs. All they had was a small kitchen table and one handful of rice. They were, he says, virtually devoid of possessions. In fact, the girls, who were 11 and 13, each had only one short-sleeved dress, and a thin, gray sweater they shared. When they walked the half-mile to school on bitter cold mornings, Lydia would wear the sweater for part of the distance and then hand it to her shivering sister, who would wear it the rest of the way.

Despite their poverty and the painful arthritis that kept Perfecta from working, she still talked confidently about her faith in Jesus. She was convinced He had not abandoned them. Strobel says he never sensed despair or self-pity in her home. Instead, there was a gentle feeling of hope and peace.

Strobel finished his article and moved on to other assignments. But on Christmas Eve, in the middle of a slow news day, he decided to pay a visit to the Delgados. When he arrived he was stunned by what he saw. Readers of his article had responded to the family's need in overwhelming fashion, filling the small apartment with donations – new furniture, appliances, and rugs; a large Christmas tree and stacks of wrapped presents; bags of food; and a large selection of winter clothing. Readers had even donated a generous amount of cash.

But it wasn't the gifts that shocked Lee Strobel the most. It was the Delgados' response to the gifts. He found Perfecta and her granddaughters getting ready to give away much of their newfound wealth. When he asked Perfecta why, she answered in halting English: "Our neighbors are still in need. We cannot have plenty while they have nothing. This is what Jesus would want us to do." Referring to all the gifts they had received, she said: "This is wonderful. It is very good. We did nothing to deserve this. It is a gift from God. But it is not His greatest gift. No, we celebrate that tomorrow. That is Jesus." (Adapted from *The Case for Christmas*.)

Wow! What should we do then?

John answered in verse 11: "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." Be generous with what you have, and share with those who are in need. That is the fruit of repentance.

As Jesus said in John 13:17: “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

3. POINT OTHERS TO THE SAVIOR

Third, to prepare the way for the Lord, we can do exactly what John the Baptist did, which is to point other people to the Savior. How? By the life we live and by the witness of our words. By the words we speak and the character of our lives.

John was not out to make a name for himself or to draw attention to himself. After Jesus came on the scene, and people in larger and larger numbers began to follow Him – including some who had been disciples of John – John didn’t get mad. He didn’t become jealous. He didn’t feel hurt. No. He rejoiced. For it was just what he wanted. In John 3:30, he makes this remarkable statement: “He (Christ) must become greater; I must become less.”

Jesus must become greater and greater. You and I, like John, must become less and less. Jesus must increase in stature and fame, in the affections and devotion of men’s hearts. I must decrease.

As Jesus becomes greater and greater in us, and we become less, it will be our desire to point others not to ourselves but to our incomparable Savior.

Is it the desire of your heart to point others to Jesus? Is it your desire, like Andrew, to bring your friends or neighbors or family members to Jesus (John 1:40-42)? Remember, we are Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us (2 Corinthians 5:20).

4. REMEMBER THE REASON FOR THE SEASON

The fourth way to prepare the way for the Lord is simply to remember the reason for the season and keep Christ at the center of your Christmas. Don’t let yourself get sucked in by the siren’s cry of commercialism, by the magnet of materialism or the creeping secularization of Christmas. Keep your eyes on Jesus.

If someone wishes you “Happy Holidays,” politely respond with a warm and winsome “Merry Christmas” or “Have a blessed Christmas” in return. Don’t be timid. Don’t be mean or angry or argumentative, but don’t allow others to hijack Christmas or redefine it for you.

Prepare the way for the Lord making and keeping His birth and its meaning for the world the focus and center of your Advent and Christmas.

A man went to the post office during the hectic days before Christmas. After helping him take care of his business, the clerk asked: “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

The man jokingly said: “Can you help me pay for Christmas?”

Without missing a beat, the clerk replied: “He already paid for it.”

Indeed He did. And like that postal clerk, we can honor Him – the Christ of Christmas – by remembering the reason for the season, by recalling what He has done for us, and by keeping Christ at the center of all we do and think this Christmas season. And always.

Prepare the way for the Lord. May it be so in us, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.