

Sermon 12/9/18 **Luke 3:1-6 Preparing for Christmas** Dear Believers:

It's that time of year again, whether we like it or not.

- How many shopping days until Christmas?
- How many Christmas parties and special functions on marked on our calendars this month?

We live in a fast pace lifestyle. If we don't purposely put the brakes on some things, it will be hectic for us as we approach December 24. This past week I looked at my calendar and it seemed to me that just a couple of weeks ago it was Labor Day and Thanksgiving Day seemed like yesterday.

At this time of year shopping, decorating the tree, having family and friends over, come rushing into our lives so much so that it seems we don't have time to think about what we are doing. Presents, trees, food and family are all good and important but if we are not careful these things may overshadow our worship lifestyle.

On this December 9, some 15 days before Christmas we need to be reminded what the purpose is behind all of our preparations for Christmas. We need to be reminded how important it is that Jesus continue to be our focus amid these preparations.

Who reminds us of the coming Messiah?

- John the Baptist – the voice in the wilderness
- The voice calling people to repent of their sin and look to their Savior

Part of our preparation for Christmas is to repent of our sin. Oh, that is not as pleasant as shopping, decorating the tree or attending special events but repenting of our sins is the most important preparation for Christmas we can make.

John the Baptist entrance upon the world's scene did not go unnoticed. The Gospel of Luke gives us the political and religious setting of the times when John the Baptist began his ministry. In Luke 3 we have the story of real people living in real places with real events.

In this real world came John the Baptist with God's message of repentance. One historian wrote about John the Baptist's entrance into the world at this time:

The times were ripe....Rome had reached her highest pinnacle of development under Augustus and was now on the downward road of decline. The sacredness of marriage had disappeared and nameless abominations remained instead....Might was substituted in the place of right and justice fled from the land. The degenerated tastes of the people ran to unlawful public amusements in which the emperor would butcher thousands in the arena to make a Roman holiday....violence, robbery, murders without trial and cruelty were charged against the administration of Pontius Pilate....The religious conditions in Palestine were low. There was much religiosity but little sincere religion.

The time was ripe to prepare for Christmas. The time is ripe for us too. What should we do to prepare for Christmas?

First, may we know why we are to prepare.

Many things compete for our time.

Work would probably be on the top of our list to time consumption. Think of the names mentioned by the Gospel writer Luke in these first two verses of chapter 3. We can see that John the Baptist was part of a real world with real people who were doing real work...like you and me. There was

- Tiberius Caesar – a war hero with 30 years of war on his resume. He became emperor of Rome 14 years after Jesus was born. John started his ministry in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of Tiberius reign. Tiberius was busy keeping the empire together. He was busy building roads. He was busy with politics. He was too busy to hear and respond to John the Baptist.
- Pontius Pilate – The Romans made him the governor of Judea. He ruled for 10 years. He was busy dealing with the Jews trying to keep them from going against his policies. He was too busy to hear and respond to John the Baptist.
- Herod the tetrarch – the regional ruler of the Jewish people set up as a Roman puppet. This was the Herod that beheaded John the Baptist. This was the Herod whom Jesus appeared before after his arrest. Herod was a busy man. Too busy to hear and respond to John the Baptist.

- Philip – Herod’s brother and another regional ruler of the Jewish people. Philip was busy, too. So busy that he married his step-daughter and did not have time to hear and respond to John the Baptist’s message.
- Lysanias – another regional ruler of the Jewish people under Roman rule. He was just as busy as the others and had not time for John the Baptist.

In the midst of all of this busyness came John the Baptist with a simple message of repentance and faith in the one true God. John came during the reign of the Jewish high priests Annas and Caiaphas. Annas was the father-in-law of Caiaphas. Annas was no longer High Priest as his son-in-law Caiaphas was the sitting high priest when John came preaching. Annas still held in high regard by the Jewish people at the time of Jesus.

It was in this historic, political and religious atmosphere in Palestine that John the Baptist preached the message of God’s forgiveness to a busy world at a busy time.

Our world is busy today. Hours and hours of work and/or going to school each week and then attending meetings at night for various things keep us busy. But it is not just work that keeps us busy. We have times of recreation like hunting, fishing, golf, reading the Sunday paper, etc. All good things in and of themselves, but if over done they may take us away from hearing and responding to John the Baptist.

The word of God came to John in the desert. Why? Why didn’t the Lord direct John to the beautiful Jewish Temple in downtown Jerusalem to deliver his message of repentance and faith to the people of Israel?

Why wouldn’t the Lord want John in the temple adorned with splendid robes and all the trappings of the holy priesthood. After all, John was the son of the priest, Zechariah.

John was called to be and do something different. He ministered outside the established religious system. John’s voice would not be heard in the temple but from outside the city in the desert. God sent John out to the Jordan River. John left behind all the special trappings for worship in the temple. John did not have an altar or musicians or choirs or offering plates.

This is why the Jewish religious establishment did not welcome John the Baptist. They were so wrapped up in their man-made traditions. So when Jesus came as the Messiah they did not recognize him.

In the Old Testament God had judged Israel because of her sin by allowing her to be exiled in Babylon. God's presence had left the temple. But now, through John the Baptist, God returned to His people and He would speak to them from outside of Jerusalem through the Voice in the wilderness.

One commentator wrote this about John the Baptist:

John appeared ancient in manners and spirit but modern in speech and purpose. No sleek scribe, no pompous priest, or preacher clad in soft raiment was he; but a son of the desert, clad in garments of coarse camels' hair, bound round him by a leathern girdle, seeking his food from the rock where the wild bee left its honey....People from the banks of the Jordan crowded to hear him. His fame reached Jerusalem, and Sadducees, Pharisees, scribes, priests, publicans and sinners went forth to listen to him...those who were not too busy with life.

It is time to prepare for Christmas by remembering three things about our Lord Jesus Christ.

1. **His Will** - "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you. Be very careful, then, how you live---not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil....understand what the Lord's will is." Ephesians 5:14ff
2. **His Word** - "Set your hearts on things above...set your minds on things above..." Colossians 3:1ff
3. **His Return** "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief...look forward to the day of God and speed its coming." II Peter 3:10, 12

So many people in the days of John the Baptist did not heed his message of repentance and faith. They were not ready when Jesus came the first time. Many people today won't be ready when Jesus comes back the second time.

Three years after John the Baptist preached his message of repentance and faith Pontius Pilate found himself face to face with Jesus. So did Herod and Anna and Caiaphas. But they were not prepared. It is awful to face Jesus when one is not prepared.

What should we do, then, this Christmas season?

Know how to prepare. Hear and respond to John the Baptist's message. John's message was a message of...

- **repentance** “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” I John 1:8-9
- What do we have to repent of? Make a list. Dishonoring parents...nursing grudges...wasting our time and blessings while others are in need...saying things that hurt others...being discontent with our circumstances.
- **believe** - “No man can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.” I Cor 12:3
- “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” Philippians 1:6

John the Baptist came “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

Baptism was not new to the Jewish people. Gentiles who became converts to the Jewish faith were required to be baptized. But now John was calling upon Jews themselves to be baptized and to repent of their sins. John's baptism was a baptism marked by repentance. Repentance and being baptized was linked together.

Repent means to “change the heart.” It means to turn from sin and guilt to the cleansing forgiveness of God's grace. Only God can produce this change in us. Our hearts of stone melt when we hear the forgiveness which God offers us.

### **Sending Away**

To hear that our sins are forgiven is one of the most blessed things to hear. The word itself is one of the most blessed words in the Bible. The Greek word “forgiveness” means dismissing or sending away. The Bible says our sins are sent away so that even God will not find them on Judgment Day. Read Psalm 103; Isaiah 43; Micah 7

God's love and mercy will move us to live for Him vv4-6

Luke quotes the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. The Isaiah passage is a picture of the citizens of a country preparing the road over which their King would travel to visit them. John was the voice in the wilderness calling upon the people to make a spiritual road in their hearts because the King was coming. John was gathering people who were

anticipating the coming Messiah. This Messiah would provide them with forgiveness and peace.

The imagery of this peace is pictured in verse 5.

Recall that Isaiah wrote these words to the children of Israel who were distressed and oppressed. The northern tribe had gone into exile at the hands of their enemies. The southern kingdom was threatened with exile by Babylon. There was no visible hope but Isaiah promised the coming of a Messiah who would bring redemption.

### **Hope**

This was a message of hope by Isaiah and repeated by John the Baptist. We have a message of hope in forgiveness and eternal life.

This is the Christmas message. We are preparing for hope found in the ChristChild.