

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Second Sunday In Advent, December 10, 2023

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)
Hymns: 64, 58:7, 63, 498:1-4, 75
Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-5, Acts 13:13-25, Matthew 3:1-12.
Sermon Text: Luke 3:1-18
Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

We read in the Gospel according to Saint John *“There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.”* (John 1:6–9, NIV84)

Perhaps you have seen a major road-building project. Today we use that picture to talk about

JOHN THE BAPTIST’S ROAD-BUILDING PROJECT

- 1. The Gospels tell us about John**
- 2. His message is “Repent!”**
- 3. The need for repentance.**
- 4. The joyous results of repentance.**

John whom we call “the Baptist” was a prominent prophet, preacher and teacher early in the New Testament. His mission was to prepare the way for Jesus, to announce that the Savior of all mankind had come.

Even before his birth, he was a special person. He was born to Zechariah, who was a priest in the temple, and his wife Elizabeth. *“They had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.”* (Luke 1:7, NIV84) The angel Gabriel announced to him when he was working at the temple that they would have a son. Because he didn’t believe the angel, he was unable to speak until the son was born.

They had specific instructions for raising this son. *“The angel said to him: ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.’”* (Luke 1:13–17, NIV84) When Mary, the mother of the Lord came to visit Elizabeth, who was a relative, we read that John leaped in his mother’s womb!

At God’s right time, Matthew tells us that *“John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: ‘A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”*” (Matthew 3:1–3, NIV84)

Luke is even more specific about when John was preaching: *“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracoonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah*

the prophet: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God’s salvation.’” (Luke 3:1–6, NIV84)

The preparation of the way for the Lord’s coming to his people is especially an image of the preparation of the heart to receive God. The desert is a picture of the spiritual condition of people. All mankind is, by nature, separated from God as God’s enemies. There was a lack of repentance as well as a lack of the fruits of repentance in Israel. The people were lost in their sins and a lack of the true message of the Gospel.

The evangelists are all also very specific about John’s message.

It is a message of repentance, and John uses the language of road construction. ***“As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.’”*** (Luke 3:4–5, NIV84)

Today when we see such a road-building project we expect to see bulldozers, dump trucks and other heavy machinery to move the dirt and level hills and fill in valleys and make crooked roads straight. In John’s day, such work was done by hand, with shovels and baskets and perhaps animals to help haul dirt, rock, sand and gravel. This picture makes the required transformation even more drastic.

While we may think nothing of moving a huge pile of dirt, such a project in New Testament times was a major, major change in the landscape and required a tremendous amount of work to bring about the change.

But making straight paths and roads, filling in valleys and leveling mountains and hills is a really drastic change, even today! Can you imagine what it meant to people in John’s day? That is a picture of repentance, a picture of the repentance that is necessary to stand before God.

The person with an unbelieving heart may think that ‘if I make some minor changes to my lifestyle and to my words, that will be adequate to stand righteous before God.’ But that won’t do it. A major change is needed, and not just once but every day. It must begin in the heart.

True, genuine repentance is a change of heart that then shows itself in a change in deeds and in lifestyle and even a change in words. Don’t we even confess publicly in our worship services that we sin daily and much in thought, word, and deed? Repentance is a change of mind and a change of heart about one’s sin. It is being sorry for my sins and a desire to stop sinning. It is sorrow over sin and faith in the forgiveness of sins.

True repentance isn’t just saying the word “sorry” and then going on with your life just as before. It requires a road-building program in the heart. It requires leveling the mountains of sin, transgressions, and iniquity and the hills of self-righteousness, pride, arrogance and all the sins we are steeped in. It requires a road-building program of filling in the valleys with true humility and sorrow over sin.

It requires repenting of sins of commission and sins of omission. Sins of commission, the things we do can be compared to the mountains and hills. The sins of omission, the things that we don’t do can be compared to the valleys.

Such a drastic change is necessary. No one can stand before God on his own and expect or even imagine that God will reward him with heaven.

What we can easily forget is that any unrepented sin deserves eternal damnation in hell and will be rewarded with eternal damnation in hell.

True repentance, the proper metamorphosis, the complete change of the mind, must produce fruits, must show itself in a God-pleasing life, which is expressed in a thorough transformation of the heart and life. Without such change, conversion is but a pretense and is valueless before God.

John does not mince words but is extremely blunt when he says ***“to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.’”*** He calls them snakes, vipers, poisonous snakes! This is a reference to the words of Isaiah when he writes ***“No one calls for justice; no one pleads his case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments and speak lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil. They hatch the eggs of vipers and spin a spider’s web. Whoever eats their eggs will die, and when one is broken, an adder is hatched.”*** (Isaiah 59:4–5, NIV84)

John even gives specific examples of repentance and the fruits of repentance when he talks to several groups of people who came to hear him. ***“‘What should we do then?’ the crowd asked”.*** How can we show our

repentance? John answered that the man with two coats, literally two shirts, should share with the person who has none! Doesn't that make us think about all the clothes in our closet? He also tells them that the person who has food should do the same! ***"Tax collectors also came to be baptized. 'Teacher,' they asked, 'what should we do?' 'Don't collect any more than you are required to,' he told them."*** Tax collectors were considered among the greatest thieves in the nation, since detailed tax rates and tables weren't available to people when they paid taxes. ***"Then some soldiers asked him, 'And what should we do?' He replied, 'Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.'"*** John's words remind us of Paul's words in First Timothy: ***"if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that."*** (1 Timothy 6:8, NIV84)

We can and must apply Scripture to our own hearts and lives. We can look at each of the ten commandments and remember the discussion in the catechism about how each of those sins begins in the heart and explodes and is obvious in our sinful words and deeds.

We often tend to think about the outward sins we commit. We, too, just like John's hearers need a major road-building project in our hearts. Look also at your heart, using the mirror of the Law.

John was really harsh with his words. But sin deserves harsh, strong admonition and condemnation.

But John didn't only point out the sinfulness of every human being.

"The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, 'I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.' And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them." (Luke 3:15–18, NIV84)

Don't forget the last sentence: He exhorted, appealed, encouraged, implored, pleaded and urged them with his words. But he also proclaimed, taught, and preached the good news, the Gospel. That good news was the message of the forgiveness of sins because of what Jesus Christ did for you and for all mankind. That good news is made your very own through faith, through believing that Jesus Christ really came to redeem you, to forgive all your sins and to lead you to eternal life.

May John's road-building program touch your heart and may the Gospel he proclaimed surround your heart and your life! Amen.