

**MINISTRY BY MAIL**  
**Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship**  
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**Third Sunday In Advent, December 15, 2024**

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 63:1-4 (63:5) 75, 63, 54

Lessons: Zephaniah 3:14-18a; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Text: Luke 3:2-6,

Sermon by Pastor M. H. Eibs

In Christ, dear friends,

The Evangelist Luke, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in the words before our text tells us who the Roman Emperor and Roman Governor of Judea were, and also the Jewish rulers, at the time when John the Baptist began his ministry. In this way he established the exact time when John did his work as the Forerunner of Christ, and emphasizes how important it was.

So important was the work of John the Baptist that Isaiah the prophet spoke what is quoted in our text about John's work. This was 700 years before John was born. And 400 years before he was born, Malachi the prophet had foretold: "*See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me,*" Malachi 3:1. Jesus also said, "*I tell you the truth: among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist,*" Matthew 11:11. And yet John the Baptist's ministry had to do with Jesus and was not intended to glorify John himself.

Today we want to learn about:

**THE MINISTRY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST**

- 1. He was called by God to proclaim the coming of the Messiah.**
- 2. He preached the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins in Christ.**

*"During the priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert."* In the first chapter of Luke's Gospel we read about the birth of Zechariah's son, John. God gave to Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth a son in their old age, after Elizabeth all her married life had been unable to conceive children. It was truly a wonderful miracle when John was born. We are also reminded of what Luke's Gospel tells about Zechariah before John was born. He was unable to speak until John was circumcised eight days after John's birth. This happened because Zechariah had not believed the angel Gabriel's message foretelling of John's birth. This was six months before Jesus was born.

At the time when John the Baptist began his work Annas and Caiaphas were the Jewish high priests and John was about 30 years old. John did his work preaching in the desert area around the Jordan River. Here he lived a very austere life, a self-denying life. He wore the clothes and ate the food that could be found in the desert.

Of greater importance to us is the fact that he was directly called by God to be his messenger. He was to be the Forerunner of the Messiah, the one who would go before him to proclaim his coming. This means that John did his work at the express command of God and spoke the words God wanted him to speak. He was to proclaim only what God wanted the people to hear, and nothing else.

So today also, while God does not directly call pastors, they do have a divine call through the Christian congregation. This means that the preaching of God's Word by the pastor and all his teaching carries with it the divine authority of God. Furthermore, it means that the pastor is to proclaim only what God has recorded in his holy Word. The Apostle Peter put it this way: "*If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God,*" 1 Peter 4:11. In other words, the preachers are to adhere strictly to the revealed Word of God as recorded

in the Bible. They are not to preach their own ideas or opinions or to choose only those things in the Bible that they consider true, as is done by false prophets today. That would be an insult to God!

Our text speaks of John's preaching as ***"a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord.'"*** The word ***"calling"*** in our text literally means an insistent crying out. The theme of his crying out was ***"Prepare the way for the Lord."*** He was the Forerunner of the Christ, specifically sent to preach to the people to prepare for the promised Messiah's coming. The people were to learn, as Paul wrote to Titus, ***"The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men,"*** Titus 2:11. The people were to find out that the Promised Savior was about to appear publicly. He would preach and perform miracles. Above all he would give his life on the cross as God's Lamb of sacrifice for the sins of all people. John's preaching was to prepare the people so they would not be indifferent to their coming Savior.

Now we learn from our text the details of John's preaching. **He preached the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins in Christ.**

## 2.

We are told, ***"He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."*** The people were told to repent of their sins and be baptized. This is what Isaiah the prophet had foretold, as it is quoted in our text: ***"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.'"*** This beautiful, picturesque language reminds us of the oriental custom of fixing up the road on which a great ruler would enter into a city. Much work was done to level the hills and fill up the valleys so the way would be smooth.

In using this kind of language John the Baptist had only one thing in mind, and that was the repentance of the people. This was emphasized in all his preaching. What is repentance? First of all, it is a sincere, heartfelt sorrow for sins, and secondly, it is a firm trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins. The first part of repentance, namely, sorrow for sins, needs to be emphasized. The religion of this world, the false religious ideas most people in the world have, does not include sorrow for sin. They don't even know what sin is because they don't hear the Law of God preached. The Bible teaches, ***"Through the law we become conscious of sin,"*** Romans 3:20. The purpose of the preaching of the Law is that ***"every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God,"*** Romans 3:19. The false religions of this world teach the people that they should try their best to be good and do good, and with that effort they think they are good enough to go to heaven. Many false religions do not even teach about the true God, the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Moslems speak about a god called Allah and deny that Jesus is the very Son of God, true God and true Man. The terrorists are told that if they become suicide bombers and kill their enemies, they will enjoy the pleasures of the flesh with 72 virgins in what they call heaven. The Hindus have many gods. The Unitarian-Universalist Church denies the Bible teaching of the Holy Trinity. So we can see how far people in these religions are from knowing the truth about sin and repentance. These people are headed for hell because the Bible says, ***"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him,"*** John 3:36.

What John the Baptist preached was expressed by the tax collector who said with great sorrow, ***"God, have mercy on me, a sinner,"*** Luke 18:13. This is what all of us should pray with great sorrow, for we are all descendants of Adam. Speaking of Adam's sin, Paul writes, ***"The result of one trespass was condemnation for all men,"*** Romans 5:18. We should also confess that every day we have broken God's commandments by our thoughts, words and deeds. This is a very humbling truth for us to ponder. The high mountains and hills of our sinful pride need to be leveled. We have nothing good in us by nature about which we can boast. Every self-righteous thought comes from Satan himself, and should be renounced as we would reject anything with a "made-in-hell" stamp on it. What the Lord wants us to confess is what the psalmist David wrote, ***"Surely I was a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me,"*** Psalm 51:5.

Thank God, there is hope for us sinners. It is found alone in Christ Jesus our Savior and his work of redemption. So we want to learn that the second part of repentance is a sincere trust in Jesus for full forgiveness of sins. The psalmist David had such trust in the coming Messiah and he wrote, ***"A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise,"*** Psalm 51:17. The Lord Jesus graciously invites all sinners, ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest,"*** Matthew 11:28. The heavy burden of our sins is taken

from us and we have rest for our souls because of what Jesus did for us. The valleys of self-despair have to be filled in by the preaching of the Gospel of Christ. That's why John pointed out Jesus to his followers and said, ***"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."*** John 1:29. Jesus gave his life on the cross as the sacrificial atonement for our sins. So the Apostle John wrote about ***"Jesus Christ, the Righteous One: He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world,"*** 1 John 2:2. That was a most precious price Jesus paid for our redemption. Peter wrote, ***"You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect,"*** 1 Peter 1:18-19. So it was that ***"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God,"*** 2 Corinthians 5:21.

Of ourselves we have no righteousness that enables us to stand before the holy God. But we ***"are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus,"*** Romans 3:24. That's why we need to trust in Jesus with all our heart. And this faith is not of our own doing or decision. ***"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast,"*** Ephesians 2:8-9. The Holy Spirit creates this true faith in our hearts through the powerful Gospel Word.

We pray that God will work in our hearts through the words John preached in his ministry, so that we will be prepared to celebrate the coming birthday of our dear Savior. As we prepare for that celebration, let us be comforted by what Paul Gerhardt wrote:

*"Sin's debt, that fearful burden, let not your souls distress;  
Your guilt the Lord will pardon and cover by His grace.  
He comes, for men procuring the peace of sin forgiven,  
For all God's sons securing their heritage in heaven." Amen.*  
(The Lutheran Hymnal 58:7)

(Revised from a Ministry By Mail sermon for December 12, 2004)