

In the name of ✝ Jesus. Amen.

Surely the season of Advent is a stark reminder that we in the church march to the beat of a different drum. While the world is making merry with all sorts of Christmas celebrations, we in the church listen to rather sober preaching from an eccentric wilderness preacher. While the world starts its celebration of Christmas earlier and earlier — store shelves start to fill up with Christmas items even before Halloween is done; Hallmark begins cycling through its library of Christmas movies in October — we in the church wait and wait. While the world is joining with Andy Williams in singing, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year,” the church is pondering her sin and singing of God’s pardon, His “blotting out [of] each dark misdeed” (LSB347). She is bowing her head and making the sign of the cross and singing of her life “cleansed ... from sin,” and how this is the time to “prepare” our hearts “for Christ to come and enter there” (LSB344).

Important things require preparation and planning. The school Christmas program a week from Tuesday requires preparation. The confirmations we had last Wednesday and last Sunday required preparation, weeks of preparation to get to the point of saying, “yes, I confess the Evangelical Lutheran faith”. A wedding requires months of planning and preparations and rehearsals, too.

So it was for the coming of the Lord, the promised Messiah, the Savior of the world. That was the most significant, the most important event ever. Time is marked by this event: there’s BC, before Christ, and AD, Anno Domini, the year of our Lord. You might imagine: this event required preparation.

And that’s where John the Baptist comes in. He was “*a man sent from God*” (John 1:6)—in fact, a messenger sent by the very One whose way John was to prepare, by the Son of God Himself: “*I send MY messenger, and he will prepare the way before ME,*” said the Lord through the prophet Malachi.

The angel Gabriel announced John’s purpose to his father Zechariah, too. John was “*to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.*” He will turn them, the angel said; turn them to the Lord, turn their hearts, turn them from disobedience to “*the wisdom of the just*” (Luke 1:16-17). John’s preparation would happen by means of repentance.

After a bit of a tussle with the angel, Zechariah understood, and nine months later, when his son John was born, he proclaimed it, too. John would “*go before the Lord to prepare his ways,*” giving “*knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins*” (Luke 1:76-77).

John would be a prophet, Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, had foretold. And today we see that word from God come true, for “*the word of the Lord came*

to [John].” And what he received, he proclaimed. Not surprisingly, it had to do with baptism—he is called the baptizer, after all—with repentance, and the forgiveness of sins. John went about “*the region around the Jordan*,” Luke reports, “*proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*” In this way, Luke says further, John fulfilled what another prophet, Isaiah, foretold of this messenger: “*The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*”

John came to prepare the people for the end of their long wait—the coming of their long-expected Savior and His kingdom was at hand. “*Repent!*” he proclaimed. Knock down your pride. Be built up in the forgiveness of your sins. Forego ungodliness. Live in peace with one another. See your salvation in the One who is about to burst onto the scene as the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. And having received this mercy, having been “*delivered from ... our enemies, ... serve [the Lord] ... in holiness and righteousness ... all our days*” (Luke 1:74-75).

Dear saints, Advent is our time of waiting to prepare for the yearly celebration of Christ's coming, and it's not so long—a mere four weeks. And in this season, we still listen to John. His preaching is still important for us today—we're still called to repent! His preparation is just as necessary for us today—we still need forgiveness. His exhortation is still essential for us today—we must “*bear fruits in keeping with repentance.*” For John prepared the people then, and he prepares us now, not simply by calling us to repent as a right attitude, but to a true repentance that implies response—just as true faith calls us to good works without calling upon us to trust in the works. Therefore, just as a true and living faith bears fruit—remember, “*faith apart from works is dead*” (James 2:26)—so it is also with true repentance, a combination of sorrow for sin and faith in God's gracious forgiveness. This faith that is a part of true repentance must also “*bear fruits in keeping with repentance.*”

These fruits are the necessary result of being made part of Christ's kingdom—not necessary for salvation, but the necessary fruit of a branch having been grafted onto Christ the Vine, as we confess, “it is necessary to do good works” (Augsburg Confession, XX:27). Indeed we confess, “after man has been justified through faith, then a true living faith works by love (Galatians 5:6). Good works always follow justifying faith and are surely found with it, if it is true and living faith [James 2:26]. Faith is never alone, but always has love and hope with it [1 Corinthians 13:13]” (Formula of Concord, Epitome, III:11).

But lest you think that you cannot produce such fruits, that your good works are of little significance, consider how John responds to the question: “*What then*

*shall we do?*” He answers, if you have more than you need, share what you have. If you're a tax collector, be honest. If you're a soldier, don't use your position of power for extortion.

And for us? Where shall we start? Consider your various callings—are you a pastor or hearer? Are you a citizen or a public servant? Are you a husband, wife, parent, child? Do your duty with love! In faith, do what God commands, and these are good works.

And when you fail, repent. And you will fail, for you're human, and even when you know the right, you don't do it, but you do the very thing you hate (Rom. 7). So, repent! Be forgiven. Return daily to your baptism in which you not only were forgiven, but received the Holy Spirit. Return daily to your baptism wherein the Lord began a good work in you—there's your daily preparation for His way. Return daily to the Lord...in contrition and repentance, that the new man in you may daily come forth and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. Return daily to the Lord, looking to His Son, hearing His word of forgiveness for you. Return weekly to His holy Supper—for there, too, is His forgiveness and salvation in His flesh—and He will bring His good work to completion in the day of Jesus Christ.

And in this Advent season with its waiting for the coming of the Lord, don't be distracted by the world; don't be wooed by its tempting call. Heed St. Paul's exhortation: *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind”*—live in repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Then engage with God's word, that *“you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect,”* and do it, bearing fruit in keeping with repentance. Let this be our own preparation for the coming of our Lord. God grant us ears to hear, and the faith to do.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.