

In the name of ✠ Jesus. Amen.

We think of Advent as the preparatory season for the coming of the Son of God in the flesh, as the son of Mary, the little babe born in Bethlehem. But the Church is none too keen about getting there too soon. So last week we talked about Jesus' humble entry into Jerusalem as King, the One who came to save us with His humble ascent to the cross; and this week, we hear the "*beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,*" but it doesn't begin in eternity as with the Gospel of John or with a story of Jesus' conception and birth, as with Matthew and Luke. It begins with John's preaching of Jesus as the Son of God, as Lord.

Truly the coming of John on the scene heralds the coming of Christ. Luke goes to great pains to tell us about the miraculous conception of John to Elizabeth and Zechariah, and then later his birth, as a prelude to Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and then His birth. John was to "*make ready for the Lord a people prepared*" (Luke 1:17), the angel told Zechariah.

And his father Zechariah, "*filled with the Holy Spirit*" (Luke 1:67), proclaimed John to be the one who "*will go before the Lord to prepare his ways*" (Luke 1:76). John is a transitional person in the story of the Gospel. He comes as a "*prophet of the Most High*" (Luke 1:76), and yet his preaching marks the beginning of the preaching of "*the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*" This John is the forerunner, not just of the Christ, but of the Lord, standing on the boundary of the Lord speaking to His people by the prophets and the Lord speaking to us by His Son.

John was, in fact, "*the prophet of the Most High,*" come "*in the spirit and power of Elijah*" (Luke 1:17). A prophet and "*more than a prophet*" (Matt. 11:9), Jesus said, He is the Elijah (Matt. 11:14) whose coming would precede "*the great and awesome day of the Lord*" (Mal. 4:5). John was the Lord's messenger sent "*before [His] face,*" to "*prepare [His] way before [Him]*" (Mark 2:2; Matt. 11:10). His camel's hair clothing and leather belt confirm: this was the promised Elijah, for this was how Elijah's appearance was described (2 Kings 1:8). His diet of locusts and wild honey also is what we might expect of one who is a wilderness preacher, the "*voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'*"

Yes, John was preparing the people for the coming of the Lord by preaching out in the wilderness. He prepared the people by preaching, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Matt. 3:2), and preaching a "*baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*"

It is interesting to me how disfavored the word "repent" has become, even within the church. Oh, you might get an "I'm sorry" from someone, but you still

have to figure out what they're sorry about: that you took offense, that they were caught, or if it's a child being made to say "sorry," that they're being made to say it. Those aren't "contrition"—sorrow for sin, which is the first step in repentance. Apologize is the favored word these days, but here again, one has to figure out whether the person is trying to express sorrow for wrongdoing, or if they're making an excuse or giving a self-justification. Yes, repentance includes contrition: sorrow for sin, a desire to do better, and especially faith that trust the forgiveness that is ours in Christ Jesus. Maybe we in the church should resolve to return to the Biblical way of repentance.

For this is what John does as he "*Prepares the way of the Lord.*" He calls people to repentance and then gives "*knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins*" (Luke 1:77). And that salvation would come from the Lord Himself who would visit and redeem His people; that salvation would come from the "*horn of salvation*" that would arise out of "*the house of his servant David*" (Luke 1:68-69)—the Christ, David's son and David's Lord. That salvation would come from the One who, like David of old, would tend His flock like a shepherd, but who Himself would become a lamb to be sacrificed to take away the sins of the world.

We see our salvation in the Christ who was "*lifted up from the earth*" (John 12:32) —lifted up on a cross — that the whole world might look to Him and be saved. For it is in His being lifted up that the Son glorifies the Father, and draws all people—all flesh—to Himself. And this is the will of the Father: that we look to the Son and believe in Him and so have eternal life.

This is the Christ that John the Baptist points us to by his preaching—the One who gives up His life as the sacrifice for the sins of the world, "*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.*" And this he does by preaching repentance and pointing us to baptism, not a one-time repentance that leads to baptism, but a whole life that is filled with repentance as you daily remember your baptism, drown the old Adam in you, and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

For the Forerunner's call to repent does not end with his gruesome death, nor with the slaughter of the Lamb of God. John's call to repentance is still the watch word for the church, for Jesus Himself gives the church this commission: preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins, and, indeed, this is still the way we remain a people prepared for Jesus' coming here today and on the last day. This is the way we are "*found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace*"—by remembering the Lord's marvelous doing on our behalf through Jesus, and building on this Rock rejected (Ps. 118:22-23).

We remain a people prepared by remembering that Christ still comes for us, not only in word and water, but also in bread and wine. And you prepare to meet Him today at this Supper through repentance and forgiveness and faith in His words. For the one who comes worthily to the Supper is he who humbly acknowledges that he is a sinner in need of Christ. The one who comes worthily to the Supper is he who has faith in Jesus' words, "*This is my body,*" "*this is my blood,*" "*given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins*" (Matt. 26:26-28). The one who comes worthily to the Supper is he who acknowledges that, with Christ's body and blood, He gives the forgiveness that His sacrifice won—repentance and forgiveness and faith in His words.

Indeed, we are a people prepared, in part because we have listened to the voice of him crying out in the wilderness, pointing us to the One who came to be sacrificed for our sins, because we have listened to the voice's call to straighten the crooked paths, level the mountains and raise up the valleys, that is, to repent and believe, that we might be a people prepared to receive Him who comes to us today in marvelous ways, because we have listened to the herald of good news comfort us in our victorious Savior, in warfare that is ended, in iniquity that is pardoned, for the herald came to prepare us through repentance for the coming of our God.

But John's preaching was only the beginning of the marvelous good news of our salvation. John was only the friend of the Bridegroom, not the Bridegroom Himself. John was a transitional person in this Gospel narrative; he was not the end, not the goal. John himself admitted that he was going to decrease (John 3:30)—happily, for He who is the mightier One, who was before John, yet as a man came after John, has now come. We've moved past the beginning; the fullness of the Gospel has come.

That doesn't mean that we don't still listen to John. We do, and we still hear the echoes of John's preaching today, the distant call of the voice crying in the wilderness, but the Gospel now sounds forth loud and clear from the Son Himself, the One to whom the Father commanded us to listen now. Listen now to the Son; listen to the voice of the Shepherd who tends us; listen to the Shepherd who laid down His life for us. And follow after Him, who leads us where streams of living water flow, where His verdant pastures grow.

Follow the Shepherd, who feeds us now with the celestial food of His own body and blood. You have been baptized; you have repented—again today. You hear Christ and believe in Him. Therefore, you are prepared; come and receive the Body and Blood of Christ, your God and Lord, given for you for the forgiveness of your sins, and be strengthened in your life of repentance today and unto the end.

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