



**Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church**  
Sanford, North Carolina

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**Preparing the Way**  
**Luke 1:57-80; 3:1-6**

Nineteen days . . . In case you didn't know it from all the commercials, you now have only *nineteen* days to get ready for Christmas. If you and your family gather to celebrate on Christmas Eve, then you only have *eighteen* days.

There's a lot to do to prepare for Christmas, isn't there? Gifts have to be bought. Plans have to be made. The food has to be cooked. Sometimes a little extra cleaning may have to be done. Preparing for Christmas can be hard work!

It can be hard work spiritually as well. On the Christian calendar, we call the four weeks leading up to Christmas *Advent*. The word *Advent* is from the Latin word meaning *to come*. Advent focuses on the coming of Jesus.

Advent is a season of *preparation*. It's a time when we reflect on how God prepared to send his Son that first Christmas. It's also a time to reflect on how he calls us to prepare ourselves and others for his Son's return in glory.

So on this second Sunday of Advent, let's think together about *preparing the way* for Christ's coming.

***John: preparing the way for Jesus***

As you heard the Scripture lessons for today being read, you might have thought to yourself, "I thought we're getting ready for Christmas. Why are we hearing about John the Baptist?"

The reason is really simple. *God sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus, the Messiah.*

You remember his story, don't you? Luke tells about the birth of John and his ministry alongside the birth and early ministry of Jesus.

Luke begins his telling of the gospel of Jesus Christ with John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah was "a priest who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendent of Aaron" (1:5).<sup>1</sup>

They were both "upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly" (1:6). They were people of the highest character.

But they were childless. In a time when people thought there was something wrong with your relationship with God if you were married and didn't have children, this wonderful righteous couple had no children. And now they were old, so it seemed inevitable that they would never have children.

Biblical scholars tell us that at this time, there were about 20,000 priests in Israel. They were grouped into 24 divisions. Each division ministered at the temple one week twice a year. One

time when Zechariah's division was on duty serving at the temple, he was chosen by lot to burn incense in the temple. This was virtually a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, since there were hundreds of priests in each division.<sup>2</sup>

While Zechariah was burning the incense, the angel Gabriel appeared to him in the temple and declared that Zechariah and Elizabeth were going to have a son, and they were to name him John. This son would

. . . 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 (1:17).

As you can imagine, Zechariah had his doubts. After all, he and Elizabeth were getting old. So Gabriel gave him a sign—Zechariah would be mute until the child was born! You really have to be careful with this sign business.

Well, Zechariah went home. Elizabeth became pregnant, and remained in seclusion for six months.

And then one day she received a visit from her younger relative Mary. When Mary came in, Elizabeth's baby leaped within her, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit and blessed Mary as the mother of her Lord. And there they sat, praising God and telling their stories to each another about how God was working in their lives—one woman childless, but expecting a child though she was past child-bearing years; the other a young woman who was pledged to be married, but not yet married, carrying a child who had no human father.

When the time came for Elizabeth to have her baby, she bore a son. As was the Jewish custom, when he was eight days old, they came to circumcise the child and name him. Their relatives wanted to name him after his father. But Elizabeth objected and said, "No! He is to be called John" (1:60). They didn't understand. Nobody else in the extended family had that name. So they made signs to Zechariah to see what he wanted to name him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote out his declaration: "His name is John."

Immediately he was able to speak again, and offered the beautiful prophecy about his son that was read earlier in our service today from Luke 1:67-79. He praised God for how he was working to bring salvation and redemption to his people Israel. And then he said to his son John:

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him . . . (1:76).

And then Luke tells us that John "grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel" (1:80). And we don't see him again until Luke 3.

But when we get to Luke 3, we see John looming large. He is a grown man at this point, probably about 30 or 31 years old. Luke marks the time very specifically:

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 Lysanius tetrarch of Abilene—during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas . . .  
(3:1-2)

It was at this precise time when this prophet son of a priest, who had been in the wilderness for years, received the word of the Lord. He went into all the region surrounding the Jordan River, “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (3:3).

And just as the other Gospel writers did, Luke tied John’s mission to the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3-5—as Luke quotes it—

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.”

And that’s just what John came to do, to prepare the way for Jesus to appear as the Messiah. He called on people to flee from the coming wrath, and to repent of their sins, changing their ways, depending on God and his mercy rather than their own status or standing or achievement. He called them to be baptized as an act of repentance, to show that they were changing their ways. He called on them to produce fruit that would be in keeping with repentance—lives that were characterized by righteousness and justice.

With this kind of preaching and baptism, John was preparing the way for the Messiah to come.

### ***Preparing the way***

And so Jesus came. He preached and taught the kingdom of God, cast out demons, and healed the sick. He was rejected, crucified, killed and buried. Then he rose again from the dead and ascended to the Father with the promise that he will one day return in glory to raise the dead, judge the world, and bring his kingdom in its fullness. He will come again!

In his commentary on Luke, Charles Talbert suggests that Luke has presented John in a way that he is a model for Christian witnesses as he preached Jesus and called for an ethical lifestyle.<sup>3</sup> In a very real sense, *just as John prepared the way for Christ’s first coming, so the church must prepare the way for his return.*

So *how* should we prepare the way for Jesus?

First, *we must be prepared ourselves.* John knew that full well, and he sought to live in a way that he would be prepared. He was willing to be obedient to what God had called him to do no matter what that might cost him—and it eventually cost him his life. He was living in a way that he would be found faithful when the Messiah appeared. And indeed he was.

In the same way, we should be living in a way that when the Lord returns at any moment, we’ll be ready. Our lives should demonstrate genuine repentance and faithful obedience. Remember the story Jesus told about the faithful and wicked servants (Luke 12:42-48)? The key was that the faithful servant was prepared for the master’s return by continually doing what the master had told him to do.

So it’s not just about *getting right* with Jesus; it’s also about *doing* what he would have us do.

So what are we to *do* to prepare the way for Christ’s return? *We must proclaim the gospel to the world in word and deed, calling people to repentance and faith in Christ.*

John came to the Jews “to make ready a people prepared” for the coming of Messiah. Christ has sent us into the world to “make disciples of all the nations,” proclaiming the gospel, teaching

them his ways, declaring the good news of salvation in Christ and the reality of the judgment to come, so that people from all the peoples of the world can be ready for his coming!

So John's mission was, in a sense, programmatic for the church's mission—just as he was a prophet empowered by the Spirit who preached Jesus and called for repentance and a life that demonstrated it, so the church is the prophetic community empowered by the Spirit, preaching Jesus and calling for repentance and a life of faith that demonstrates it.

In its preaching, the early church declared God's redemptive purpose, human need, and the historical facts about Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension. It warned of judgment to come and called people to repentance and faith. This word of witness was accompanied by acts of mercy and deeds of love.

That's how we should do it, too! As we demonstrate the good news by ministering to people in their need, we gain a hearing for our witness for Christ. We proclaim the good news and call people to repentance and faith.

Through our own changed lives and our work to change the world around in anticipation of what Christ will make it like when he makes all things new, we prepare the way for the Lord. It doesn't have to be great big things we're doing—sometimes it will be, but most of the time it will be those simple acts of mercy and deeds of love done in Jesus' name.

It's a story that's told in several different forms, but let me tell you this version.<sup>4</sup>

He was a cobbler, a shoemaker, living in the city of Marseilles. His neighbors loved and honored him, and often called him "Father Martin."

One Christmas Eve he sat alone in his shop, reading the story of the visit of the wise men to Jesus. He thought to himself, "If tomorrow were the first Christmas, and if Jesus were to be born in Marseilles this night, I know what I would give him!" He reached on his shelf and took down two little shoes made of the softest white leather with bright silver buckles. "I'd give him these, my finest work . . . But I'm a foolish old man. The Master has no need of my poor gifts."

He soon went to bed, but then he heard a voice calling him, "Martin!" He knew who it was. The voice said, "Martin, you have longed to see me. Tomorrow I shall pass by your window. If you see me and bid me enter, I shall be your guest and sit at your table."

He didn't sleep for joy. He got up early and cleaned his shop and decorated it with green boughs of fir. He put bread and honey and milk on the table and hung a hot drink over the fire to keep it warm. And then he watched.

It was raining and sleeting when he saw an old street sweeper pass by, obviously very cold. He invited him in to get warm, and gave him some of the hot drink.

An hour later a poor woman walked by carrying her baby in her arms. She stopped to rest in the shelter of his doorway. He invited them to come in and get warm. She was trying to get to the hospital because they were both sick and her husband was at sea. He gave her something to eat and the baby some milk. He saw that the baby had no shoes on him. The mother said, "I have no shoes for him." So he put those lovely white shoes on him—they were a perfect fit.

And then he watched for hours, and many needy people shared his hospitality that day. But his expected guest never appeared.

Finally he went to bed, disappointed, concluding it had only been a dream. But then the room was flooded with a glorious light, and to his astonishment, there appeared before the cobbler one by one the street sweeper, the mother and baby, and all the people he had helped that

day. Each one smiled and said to him, “Have you not seen me? Did I not sit at your table?” Then they each vanished.

And then he heard in the midst of the silence the gentle voice he had heard the night before, “Whoever shall receive one such little child in my name receives me,” and “For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in . . . Truly I say to you, inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it to me.”

Without realizing it, all day long Martin had been preparing the way for the Lord through his kind welcome and his caring actions toward those who came by his door in need.

And so must we.

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Tolbert, “Luke” in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9 (Nashville: Broadman, 1970), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel*, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 31.

<sup>4</sup> “The Cobbler and His Guest,” in *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul*, eds. Jack Canfield et al. (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1997), 94-96.