Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

It’s now just 19 days until Christmas. So how are your preparations going? Did you begin them, like so many others do, on Boxing Day last year? For that is when retailers try and convince you to take advantage of the sales and buy next year’s Christmas presents! And then there are the Christmas account programmes that Supermarkets begin in January that allow you to add money throughout the year so that when Christmas comes you don’t have to find a great gob of cash for the massive supermarket bill that Christmas celebrations bring to many!

But even if you try not to get caught up in the whole over-the-top commerciality of Christmas, whether it is work functions, or hosting or visiting family, or inviting someone who would otherwise be alone to join you for Christmas dinner, one way or another, we all **have to prepare for Christmas**.

And here in Luke’s Gospel, in the build up to the very first Christmas, we read about an angel telling Zechariah that his soon-to-be-born son, who we know as John the Baptist, was to “*make ready for the Lord* *a people prepared*.” It’s pretty obvious though that the being prepared spoken about here had nothing to do with making sure that the pantry was full or that the camping trailer had a WOF! So what was John’s calling? What did this people prepared for the Lord look like? And as another Christmas approaches, do we also need to be a people prepared for the Lord?

Well, we are going to see that we are to be a people prepared for the Lord. And it is wonderfully fitting that we think about what this means on a Lord’s Supper Sunday. But to see this, we must first understand how John was to prepare the people for the Lord before that first Christmas.

So two simple points as we think about **what being a people prepared for the Lord Looks like**: First, **John’s calling *back then*** and second, **our calling *today***.

1. So first of all, John’s calling “*to make ready for the Lord a people prepared*.”
   1. Those of you here last Sunday afternoon heard Brother Kyle explain how Doctor Luke, the author of this Gospel, carefully investigated all of the events that he recorded in his Gospel. And he did this so that the readers of his Gospel could have certainty that these things truly happened. In other words, Doctor Luke wanted us to have a reliable basis for our faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. And by the direction of the Holy Spirit, Luke understood that this angelic visitation to Zechariah was a very important part of the story of Jesus Christ. So our question is: Why? Why did Luke begin with *this* encounter and not with the birth of Jesus? What is so important about John the Baptist in relation to knowing Jesus as your Saviour and Lord?
      1. Well, as we also heard from Kyle last week, the answer to pretty much every question about the coming of the Lord Jesus can be found in the Old Testament. And that is why we read from **Malachi** earlier. Malachi prophesied about 450 years before the birth of John and Jesus. And Malachi said that God would send a messenger before the coming of Messiah. And this messenger would “*prepare the way before [Him],*” we read in **Malachi 3:1**.
      2. And Malachi was not the only Old Testament prophet to speak about a messenger who would prepare the people for the coming of Messiah. For 300 years before Malachi, **Isaiah** spoke about a voice crying in the wilderness, “*prepare the way of the Lord,’*” and then the glory of the Lord being revealed.
         1. And Isaiah even located the work of the one who prepared the way for Messiah in the **wilderness** or the desert. And later in Luke we read that John the Baptist was in the wilderness and that it was there that he proclaimed the baptism of repentance to the people. And then Luke quotes the verse from Isaiah 40 that I mentioned to show that John was its fulfillment.
      3. So both Malachi and Isaiah wanted the Jewish people to know that there would be a messenger who would prepare the way for the coming of Messiah. And that is why Luke began his Gospel with the account of the angel meeting Zechariah. He wanted his readers to understand that John the Baptist is the prophesied or promised messenger. What God promised to do 700 years ago and 450 years ago He has done in John the Baptist; the messenger came and then Messiah came. Conclusion? The Bible is reliable. God’s promises are trustworthy! Jesus is the long-promised Saviour!
      4. And you know, you and I can have that same confidence in the accuracy and reliability of the Bible today. Because all of God’s Old Testament promises came true in Jesus Christ, we may be certain that His New Testament promises will also come true. But just hold that thought for now.
   2. What we need to first though is to look at the Angel’s words alongside Malachi’s prophecy so we can understand how John prepared the people for the coming of Jesus. Malachi 3 just mentions a messenger who will prepare the way for the Lord. But in Malachi 4, God said “*I will send you* ***Elijah*** *the prophet before the … Lord comes*.” And while many Jews took that to mean that Elijah himself would come back to earth to be the messenger, the angel explains here in verse 17 that John would go before Messiah “*in the spirit and power of Elijah*.”
      1. And the mention of Elijah should remind us of the famous ‘**God battle’ on top of Mount Carmel**.
         1. Do you remember that epic account, boys and girls? Elijah summoned the prophets of Baal and all of the people of Israel to the mountain. Two altars were setup with animal sacrifices on them. And the Baal prophets called on Baal to send fire to burn the sacrifice. And what happened? Nothing! And then Elijah dug a moat around his altar and everything absolutely drenched in water. And then he prayed to the Lord.
         2. And if you look at verse 17, the angel said John would “*turn the hearts of the fathers to their children*.” And that is Old Testament language for genuine repentance. And listen to how Elijah prayed on top of Mount Carmel: “*Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again*.” It is the same idea – genuine repentance.
         3. And when Elijah finished praying, the fire of the Lord came down and “*burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench … [And] when all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD-- He is God! The LORD-- He is God!*"” So they worshipped God, and then, to further demonstrate their repentance, they slaughtered all of the prophets of Baal.
      2. So, if John would make ready for the Lord a people prepared “*in the spirit of Elijah*,” it would be by calling them to a genuine repentance and faith in Messiah.
   3. So now look ahead to **1:76**. When John was born, Zechariah said of him, “*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace*.” Isn’t that quite beautiful? What a lovely ministry!
      1. Well, have you ever heard the phrase ‘**lost in translation’**? Do you know what it means? It is when what one person says and what another person hears are two different things. And some might say that what Zechariah said that John would do and what John eventually did is an example of lost in translation. For in **3:7** we have a record of John preaching. Turn there for a moment. To the crowds who came out to him in the wilderness, John said, “*You brood of vipers!*” Now that’s an interesting way to start a sermon! And then he said, “*Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance … And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?"*” And he told the people to share with those in need and the tax collectors to stop ripping people off and the soldiers to stop intimidating people. And when the people asked John if He was the Promised Messiah, He said, “*I baptize you with water, but He who is mightier than I is coming, the strap 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 the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire*.”
      2. It wasn’t exactly a cute, heart-warming, ‘positive,’ life-affirming sermon, was it. It was basically, you better watch out because Messiah is coming. He is glorious and powerful, and He has come to gather His own, and if you are not prepared to receive Him He will send you to hell. Amen!
      3. And look at the next words in **3:18**: “*So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people*.” So this ‘brood of vipers’ sermon was John preaching the good news! And it is recorded, in its entirety, in Matthew’s Gospel as well! Now, there is another sermon of John recorded in the Gospel of John where he wonderfully exalts Jesus as the Christ. But that sermon finished with similar words: “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him*.”
2. So what John did, again and again and again, was to call on the people to repent of their evil deeds and to believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins. That is how he “*made ready for the Lord a people prepared*.” And with that in mind, we can turn our attention in the second place to **how we can be a people prepared for the Lord today**.
   1. And perhaps you have already figured out that that the way that you and me are a people prepared for the Lord today is also if we repent of our evil deeds and believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. The **only difference** between the people of John’s day and us is that we live on the other side of the cross! So we have the New Testament; we know so much more about who Jesus is and what He came to do than the people of John’s day. So we know that He came once to be born and to die and to rise and to ascend to heaven, but that He will also come again to judge the world. And we know this because of **the messengers** that the Lord has provided us. And those messengers include the Old Testament prophets, like Malachi and Isaiah and John the Baptist, but also the New Testament messengers:
      1. And the first one is **the Lord Jesus Himself**. As we read through the Gospels, we hear the Lord Jesus repeatedly saying, Be prepared or ready for my Second Coming! It is the main message of parables like the **wise and foolish virgins** and **the talents** in Matthew 25:
         1. We don’t have time to explain the whole parable but the wise virgins are those who repent of their sins and believe in Jesus and live like they expect His return at any moment.
         2. And the message of the parable of the talents is that those who receive all of God’s good gifts and out of thankfulness for salvation in Christ strive to serve others and obey God’s commandments, will hear Jesus say on Judgment Day, “*Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master*.” But those who do not thank God for all of His gifts and believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins, will hear Jesus say, “*You wicked and slothful servant! … cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*”
         3. And with these parables Jesus declared Himself to be the promised Saviour. So He is saying to you today, I will soon come back as Judge. Be prepared for my return; repent of your sins and believe in me now as your Saviour.
      2. So the Lord Jesus is the first New Testament messenger, if you like. But He gave us **12 other ‘chief messengers.’** Do you know who they are, boys and girls? The Apostles. The Greek word that we translate as Apostle literally means messenger!
         1. And so, for example, in **Acts 10**, when Peter was preaching to a Roman centurion and his household, he said, Jesus came and He was anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power to heal those oppressed by the devil. But the Jews “*put Him to death by hanging Him on a tree,**but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear [to us] … And He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that He is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name*.”
         2. And this is the consistent message of the Apostles – Jesus is the Saviour! Be prepared for His return; repent of your sins and believe in Him.
      3. And we can include the **preachers** that the Lord gives us in this list of messengers. Every Lord’s Day, they open up an Old Testament passage or a New Testament passage and they put Christ before us and say, Are you ready for His Second Coming? Have you believed in Him as your Saviour? Are you living a life of daily repentance and faith? Are you a people prepared for the Lord?
   2. In a few moments we will read an explanation of **the Lord’s Supper**. And the forms we use say things like, As we partake of this Supper, “*we remember that … [Jesus] shall come again to judge the living and the dead*.” And this Supper “*revives in us the hope of His return. Since He commanded us to do this until He comes, the Lord assures us that He will come again to take us to Himself … Our Lord Jesus will surely do what He has promised*.”
      1. So again, the question is: Are you prepared for Jesus’ return? Are you striving to be the kind of worker or boss or parent or child or husband or wife or church member described in the Bible? Are you concerned about widows and orphans and others who are in need, such that you are tithing? Are you eager to serve others and to be kind and patient and forgiving?
      2. Will you be one of those who because you have repented and believed, will hear Jesus say, “*Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master*,” or will you be one of those, who because you refused to repent and believe will hear Jesus say, “*You wicked and slothful servant! … cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*”
      3. And if you are one who is prepared for the return of Jesus, praise the Lord! But are you striving to be like John the Baptist by helping others to be prepared for the return of Jesus? Do you tell them that Jesus is your Saviour? Do you tell them that Jesus is coming to judge the world? Do you tell them that their only hope of heaven is to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus?
      4. May the Lord use our preaching of the good news to prepare many for His return!