

Preparing the Way - Luke 3:1-6
(Mark 1:1-4, 6; Matthew 3:1-4)
Sermon – Pastor Joe Davis
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I. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

VIDEO CLIP OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Well, today in Scripture we'll be learning about this interesting character whom we all recognize as John the Baptist, the founder of the Baptist Church.....Just kidding! John, however did practice baptism by immersion and had wholehearted faith in Jesus Christ and the whole Word of God, so we do have quite a lot in common! And if we could all pick up just a little of his intensity and willingness to proclaim God's Word boldly, no matter the cost and no matter what anyone would think, that would be outstanding! Turn with me in your Bibles to Luke chapter 3, where we'll be zeroing in today on verses 1 through 6.

As we return to our harmony of the gospels study for Communion Sunday, things are getting even more exciting because we've now reached a point in the gospels where there are multiple accounts of the same event. Our primary focus today will be Luke chapter 3, verses 1 through 6, but we'll also draw some additional information from Mark chapter 1, verses 1 through 6, and Matthew chapter 3, verses 1 through 4. Our goal in this study is to get a full, well-rounded picture of each event in the life of Christ so that we can understand more fully who he is, what he's like, what's important to him, and how he teaches us to live life with him.

Up to this point in our study we had only made it to year 12 of Jesus' life, but today we leap over about 18 years and pick up the account when Jesus was around 30 years old and just about to begin his public ministry. But before Jesus' began that public ministry, something needed to happen that had been predicted hundreds of years earlier through the Old Testament prophets: the way needed to be prepared, and John, the son of Zacharias, also known as John the Baptist, was God's hand-picked man to do the job. Our next 2 messages in this study will be focused on John the Baptist, as we seek to understand how God used this one-

of-a-kind man to prepare the way for Jesus Christ and begin bringing the good news about him.

II. THE WORD OF GOD COMES (Luke 3:1-2; Matthew 3:4)

Let's start out by reading verses 1 and 2 of Luke chapter 3, which I've labeled, "*The Word of God Comes:*"

1 Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, 2 in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness.

What I'm sure you noticed in these first two verses is that they contain some very straightforward historical details that provide the exact year in history when this event occurred and the verifiable names of real, historical, well-known world and religious leaders. Even people today who don't believe the Bible would agree that these are real people and places well-known from history. And anyone who read this account when it was written, would have known without a doubt that Luke was not writing fiction, but rather, a real, historical narrative of something that actually happened and could be verified by eyewitnesses.

The rulers and their regions

As we think about the rulers and regions mentioned in verses 1 and 2, these are some things we know about them from history: Tiberius Caesar was the emperor of the Roman Empire from A.D. 14 to 37. You remember Herod the Great, who tried to kill Jesus by killing the babies 2 years old and under in Bethlehem, and soon after died in 4 BC? Well, the Herod mentioned in these verses is actually one of Herod the Great's sons, known by history as Herod Antipas, who ruled as tetrarch over Galilee from 4 BC to AD 39...quite a long reign.

You see, "after the death of Herod the Great [in 4 BC]..., his realm was shared among his three sons: the chief part, including Judeaea, Samaria, and Idumaea, fell to his son, Archelaus with the title of ethnarch; [Archelaus, however, only had a

brief reign from 4 BC to 6 AD and was then banished to the Island of Gaul. So that's why he's not mentioned in these verses]; [Herod's son] Philip received the northeast of the realm and was called tetrarch; and Galilee was given to Herod Antipas, who also was called tetrarch." And all this is information right out of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*! As for what we know about the other rulers and regions mentioned, Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea from A.D. 26 to 36. "The Itureans were a pastoral tribe known for raiding others and [being] initially difficult to control. [And] Lysanias ruled Abilene (named for its leading town Abila)..." (*IVP Bible Background Commentary*).

Luke, in characteristic fashion, is giving us an orderly and factual account of true, verifiable history, showing again that the Bible as God's Word is historically trustworthy and accurate.

The high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas

Also mentioned by Luke in these verses are the high priests, Annas and Caiaphas, who later played a central role in the crucifixion of Jesus and had interactions with Peter and apostles as they began spreading the good news about Christ after his death and resurrection. Annas was the father-in-law of Caiaphas and they both served as high priests for many years. So that's your history lesson for today!

The specific year in history

Well, knowing all these historical facts given to us by Luke, can we determine the exact year when God called John the Baptist to begin his ministry? Well, many biblical scholars say, "Yes." Luke's historical facts seem to pinpoint the year when John the Baptist began preaching as "somewhere between September of A.D. 27 and October of A.D. 28 (or, less likely, the following year)" *IVP Bible Background Commentary*. So take yourself back to A.D. 27 today and let's consider what God did during that ordinary yet extraordinary year of real history.

The word of God in John's wilderness world

In verse 2 of Luke chapter 3, notice what happened during that year of A.D. 27 and 28: "**the word of God came.**" Into John's strange but everyday world of life

in the wilderness, wearing a camel-hair garment and a leather belt and living off locusts and wild honey, **the word of God came**. Don't you wonder what it was like when it came? Unfortunately we aren't given any details on how the word of God came to John in the wilderness, but we know it came and John knew that it was a clear word from God that called for obedient action.

III. THE WORD OF GOD CALLS FOR ACTION (Luke 3:3-6; Matthew 3:1-3; Mark 1:1-4)

Let's move on now to verses 3 through 6 of Luke chapter 3, and see how John responded to the word of God that came to him in the wilderness:

3 And [John] came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; 4 as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

"THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT. 5 'EVERY RAVINE WILL BE FILLED, AND EVERY MOUNTAIN AND HILL WILL BE BROUGHT LOW; THE CROOKED WILL BECOME STRAIGHT, AND THE ROUGH ROADS SMOOTH; 6 AND ALL FLESH WILL SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD.'"

As we look at these verses, the first point I'd like to draw out is this: *"The Word of God Calls for Action."*

The obedient arrival of John in the area of the Jordan River

Notice that the word of God came to John, and in response John came preaching into all the area around the Jordan River. In other words, the word of God John received called for action, and John responded in trusting obedience. And as John obeyed God's word, two powerful things happened. The first is displayed in these verses we just read, while the second is provided for us in Mark's account of these events.

The fulfillment of prophecy

The first powerful thing that happened as John heard God's word and took obedient action was the fulfillment of hundreds-of-years-old prophecies from Isaiah and Malachi. In Isaiah chapter 40, verses 3 through 5, Isaiah had spoken of a voice calling out in the wilderness. You saw John doing just that in the opening video clip I showed you. And John wasn't whispering, was he? He was boldly shouting or calling it out so that all could hear. If we go back to the original Old Testament prophecy, found in Isaiah 40, verses 3 to 5, this is how it's translated from the Hebrew:

3 A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. 4 "Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; 5 Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

For hundreds of years, the Jewish people had been looking forward and yearning for the arrival of this voice calling out in wilderness, heralding the soon arrival of the Messiah, the Savior! And as John heard God's word and took obedient action on it, God fulfilled this long-anticipated prophecy. John wouldn't have fulfilled the prophecy had he said, "No thanks, God. I like my peaceful life out here in the wilderness. I've got all I need. I'm comfortable. I have no desire to deal with the inconvenience and messiness and hassle of being around crowds of people. I hear what you're saying God, but I'm just not your man." Had John done that, my guess is God would have done some significant and possibly painful things to change John's mind, kind of like he did with Jonah when Jonah didn't like the word he received from God. But fortunately, John chose the much better path of trusting obedience to the word of God, no matter what might come, and through him God fulfilled this and other prophecies.

In the parallel passage of this event from the Gospel of Mark (chapter 1, verses 1 through 4), we learn from Mark that John the Baptist also fulfilled a prophecy from Malachi 3, verse 1, which says this:

"Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the Lord of hosts.

In his trusting obedience to the word of God as it came, John the Baptist was privileged to serve as God's appointed messenger who would clear the way for the Lord himself to arrive in his temple.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ

The second powerful thing that happened as John heard God's word and took obedient action was that he began the unfolding of the good news about Jesus Christ. In Mark chapter 1, verse 1, Mark identifies the arrival of John the Baptist at the Jordan River as ***"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."*** What an honor it must have been to be the one who would begin the good news of Jesus Christ and clear the way for him! And this is the calling John walked into *as he obeyed God's word.*

So we've seen first, in verses 3 through 6 of Luke chapter 3, that the word of God calls for action, and as God's people respond in trusting obedience powerful things begin to happen and God uses his people to accomplish his purposes.

IV. THE WORD OF GOD IS REPENTANCE (Luke 3:3-6; Matthew 3:1-3; Mark 1:2-4)

The second main principle I'd like to draw out of verses 3 through 6 is this: *"The Word of God is Repentance."*

The mission of God's messenger

As we look at these verses, notice first what the mission of God's messenger was: the mission of John the Baptist was to declare this message:

***... 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT. 5
'EVERY RAVINE WILL BE FILLED, AND EVERY MOUNTAIN AND HILL WILL BE***

BROUGHT LOW;THE CROOKED WILL BECOME STRAIGHT,AND THE ROUGH ROADS SMOOTH; 6 AND ALL FLESH WILL SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD.'

John as God's messenger would clear the way for Jesus by calling OTHERS to action. John's mission was to be a voice calling out, telling people to prepare the way for the Lord and make a straight path or highway for his arrival. In other words, John's job was not to build the highway himself, but to call others to do it with him.

The imagery here of what needed to be done to prepare the way for the Lord would be like asking someone to build a straight, level highway directly from Union to Joseph, right through the Eagle Caps. Sounds like an easy job, doesn't it? Wouldn't it be great to be able to zip over to Joseph in 25 minutes or less on a straight road through some of the most scenic country in Oregon? Well, that would be quite a task, wouldn't it? You'd have to do incredible amounts of blasting and tunnel building and engineering work that vastly exceed the resources available for such a job.

Fortunately, however, John is not being asked to, by himself, build an actual highway through rugged mountains. Instead, he's being asked to call people to do this in a spiritual sense. What John is being called to do as God's messenger is to tell others to prepare their own hearts and lives for the arrival of the Lord...to remove the obstacles and walls and mountains that prevent them from seeing and understanding the good news of Jesus Christ. His job was to call people to take action. In dependence on God, they needed to prepare their own hearts. John couldn't do it for them. He could tell them what needed to be done, but they would have to make the choice to do it on their own.

The message of God's messenger

So John was crying out to everyone who would listen, telling them to prepare the way for the Lord; make a straight path so the Lord and his kingdom could arrive in their lives. Now if John had stopped there, the people would probably have been very confused about how to actually prepare the way. Do we start building a new road into Jerusalem? Do we go home and clean our houses? Do we go spruce up the temple?

Well, fortunately God's messenger had a clear message about how people could prepare the way for the Lord, and there was only one way to do it: through personal repentance. John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We'll talk about this more in a moment.

The urgency of the message

John also shared with the people that the need for repentance was especially urgent right now for a very important reason. In Matthew 3, verse 2, he gives us that reason. John called out:

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

This was big news! The kingdom of heaven was at hand. John was calling people to repent because the kingdom was near...very near...and the Lord of that kingdom had already arrived and was about to be unveiled. The need to prepare the way for him through repentance was more urgent than ever. And as we'll see on display as we move through the gospels, preparation was needed because an unprepared heart doesn't see or understand the King and his kingdom. There are too many obstacles in the way.

The method of accomplishing the mission: repentance

Well, as I already mentioned, John didn't leave people in the dark about how to prepare the way for the Lord. Preparing the way for the Lord was done through true repentance for the forgiveness of sins, symbolized in baptism. If you had to define repentance today, what would you say? What are the key elements of repentance? How would you respond today if someone told you to, "Repent!"?

Repentance is rarely a popular message because it means admitting we're off track somewhere; that we're involved in some sort of sin; that we're participating in something that's wrong in God's eyes. But I hope you can see today that understanding repentance and engaging in it, not only at the moment of salvation, but throughout our walk with God, is essential. Without it we won't even be able to understand or receive God's salvation, and without it we won't be able to maintain a healthy and unhindered relationship with the Lord after we've

come to salvation. We need to understand what repentance is and be sure we're engaging in it regularly.

The Greek word translated repentance is *metanoia*, and literally means "a change of mind" (*Blue Letter Bible*). To repent is to acknowledge and own your personal sin and change your mind about it, making plans to go in the other direction. The heartbeat of true repentance is an honest acknowledgement of sin and an authentic desire and commitment to walk away from it.

Why is repentance so important? You should know if you're a parent. If your child can't even admit and own mistakes they've made and if they have no desire to change, there's of the problem. All you can do is hand out discipline. But as we look at what this passage has to say about why repentance is so important, we first of all notice that it's necessary for forgiveness of sins. John was preaching a baptism of repentance for what?...for the forgiveness of sins. John was telling people that if they wanted forgiveness of their sins they needed to repent of them. That was the only way to receive God's forgiveness. Without repentance, there would be no forgiveness.

We should clarify here that this is a completely accurate statement in terms of salvation. We can't receive the permanent and final forgiveness of sins that only comes through faith in Jesus Christ's death on the cross and resurrection from the dead, without first repenting of our sins. That's absolutely true. The door is shut and forgiveness is not possible until we repent and believe in the good news of Jesus Christ. However, we need to remember that in terms of our walk with God after the moment of salvation, forgiveness of all our sins, past, present and future is guaranteed and forever accomplished at that initial moment of true repentance and trust in Christ. If we're truly saved, we don't lose our eternal forgiveness and salvation if we don't repent of a sin we commit. Yet our relationship with God and any people we've harmed through that sin will suffer until we come to full repentance of that sin. Repentance is still desperately needed for the full relational benefits of forgiveness. If we want unhindered fellowship with God and full effectiveness in him, repentance is the way.

A second reason we can glean from the text about why repentance is so important, is that it was necessary to prepare the way for Jesus and his kingdom. John wasn't ranting and raving about repentance just for fun. He was doing it at the command of God and was boldly stating that it was the only way to prepare the way for the Lord's arrival and work. People needed to repent, owning and confessing their sins and turning away from them, in order to receive God's forgiveness for their past sins and be ready to receive the good news of Jesus Christ.

And a final reason why repentance is so important is found in the original text of the Isaiah prophecy quoted by all 4 writers of the gospels. Returning again to Isaiah 40, verses 3 to 5, listen carefully as I read it again:

3 A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. 4 "Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; 5 Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

When will the glory of the Lord be revealed and seen by all flesh? When the way has been cleared for the Lord and a smooth and level highway through the shifting desert sand dunes has been made. And how is that way cleared and that highway built, according to what we've studied today? Through the repentance of people. When people repent, then they see the glory of the Lord...then they see the salvation of our God...through repentance their eyes are opened to the truth and they understand the salvation God is providing through Jesus Christ.

We'll see a great illustration of how eyes remain closed without true repentance in our next message on the gospels, as we examine what John the Baptist did and said next to some people who were going through the motions of repentance, but didn't really mean it in their hearts. I'm even thinking of tackling it next week since it's so closely tied to what we've studied today. In that message we'll also spend some time on the significance of baptism in John's call to repentance, which we really didn't address much today.

V. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

But as we wrap up today, I'd like to leave you with what I believe is the core truth of this passage, and that is this short statement: *Repentance prepares the way for God's salvation.* In terms of salvation through Jesus Christ, we might describe it this way: Repentance reveals the door in what we thought was a solid, impenetrable wall. Until we can admit and own our sin and our desperate need for God and his forgiveness and desire to leave it behind, the way of salvation and restored relationship with him is shut and we can't even see the door to open it. But when do repent, the outline of a door appears in the wall...the Door which Jesus Christ. And we open and walk through that door by believing in his death on the cross for our sins and his resurrection from the dead, and inviting him to be our Savior and the ruler of our lives. We can admit and come clean about our sins without fear through repentance because he has already paid the penalty for those sins, and offers complete forgiveness to those who will simply repent and accept his gift of salvation.

And for those of us who have already walked through that door of salvation, we never lose our need to engage in regular repentance. As you may have noticed, believers in Christ still sin from time to time. Though we're no longer bound to sin and we have the power through Christ not to sin, the reality is that we still fail many times. As we grow in maturity, this sinning should be less and less, but this side of heaven we never reach the point where we sin is no longer an issue and we lose our need for repentance. This means that repentance toward God and others should be a regular part of every one of our lives. So I would ask: What role does repentance play in your life today? As you look at your life, do you regularly engage in true repentance when you sin? How good are you at owning and admitting your sins and mistakes to God and others and then making a plan for change through the power of God? If you can't think of the last time you truly repented of something, there may be a problem. And don't forget that we often need to repent not only to God, but to other people we've sinned against. That's the really hard side of repentance, but the freedom and restored relationship it brings is so worth the cost.

When, by the grace of God, we engage in true repentance, we pave the way for God and his kingdom to both arrive and to operate effectively in our lives. Did you notice that I said, "by the grace of God." What we must remember is that

even our ability to repent is dependent on God's work within us. Scripture repeatedly speaks of God granting repentance to people. As with everything in God's kingdom, even repentance only comes about through God's working within us. We can't truly do it on our own. Do you struggle with repentance? Do you have no desire to repent? Do you feel like you can't truly do it from your heart? Or perhaps you're here today and would love see and walk through the door of God's salvation through Christ, but you just can't seem to get there or believe it in your heart? Call out to him. Ask him to give you what you need. And keep asking. God will grant you the repentance and faith you need as you look to him for it. Our God is kind and loving and gracious and responds to those who give up on themselves and call out to him. It's his kindness, in fact, that leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). Let's call on him continually and let his kindness lead us into true repentance.

SERMON STUDY GUIDE AND APPLICATION QUESTIONS

Read Luke 3:1-6 several times, asking the Holy Spirit to guide you as you read. Look at the surrounding verses, take your time and talk to God as you read and meditate on it.

Write down from the passage or from what was shared in the sermon: 1) a truth that stands out to you; 2) anything you believe God is showing you or telling you personally through it; 3) any related Scripture that comes to mind; 4) any questions you have.

Define repentance in your own words.

Look up verses in the Bible using the words, "repentance," or "repent," and write down anything you learn about repentance through them.

How would you describe the role repentance has in your life right now?

What are some of the obstacles that keep you from regularly repenting to God?
To others?

What are some biblical ways you can grow the regular practice of repentance in your life?