

Prepare for the Lord by being Repaired

Luke 3:1-6 (NIV)

¹ In 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 Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—² during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the country 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: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. ⁶ And all people will see God’s salvation.’ ”

Thanksgiving is over. The countdown has started. How are your Christmas preparations coming along? Did you pull out the tree, string up the lights, and hang the ornaments after you were done with your shopping on Black Friday? The stores, of course, started putting up the Christmas items as soon as Halloween was over, maybe even a day or two before that. Here at church we are trying to get our Christmas checklist moving along by putting up decorations today after service. Maybe you have fought putting up decorations until you actually reach December. Or maybe you’ve succumbed and have already long ago put up the ornaments and the lights and the trees and have been blaring Christmas music and singing loudly to it. What’s the proper time to get ready for Christmas?

Timing was crucial in John the Baptist’s ministry. At a very specific point in history, lined up with “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 Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” (verses 1-2) John was commissioned by God to begin his ministry at just the right time.

Not just the timing was specified by God, but also what his ministry would be. He was there to prepare people. “He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘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 people will see God’s salvation.’ ” (verses 3-6)

In Isaiah’s time, when a king was about to make a journey, people would go out before the king and literally prepare the way. They would remove obstructions. They would make sure that the path is smooth for an easy journey. It was a way to welcome the king, but it was more than rolling out the red carpet. It wasn’t so much about honoring the royal dignitary as it was about making sure that nothing impeded the king from coming.

What obstacles were in the way of Jesus’ coming to the people in John’s day? It had been some 400 years since Malachi prophesied to the people. It had been a silent period in regards to prophecy. But they knew one day a messenger would come preparing the way for the Lord. He would refine people, purify them, and the people would respond by bringing offerings in righteousness. It just makes sense then that John came baptizing, washing, purifying the people in order to get them ready for the Lord’s first coming.

Interestingly, baptism in John’s day was not something that was actually new. History tells us that a ceremonial washing was being used prior to John’s ministry as a way of welcoming Gentile converts to Judaism. They would wash, and then be considered part of the Jewish faith. But Jews did not have to go through with this.

John’s ministry brought baptism to all people – Jew and Gentile alike. Some Jews scoffed at this. They had never needed the ceremonial washing before. Why should they need it now? Was there something wrong with them? Was there something that made them unclean? Did they need to be prepared for the Lord? Did they need the way to their hearts repaired for the Lord’s coming? Yes, and what they needed to have fixed for the Lord’s coming is much like what our hearts need to have fixed.

The obstructions that John was dealing with, according to Isaiah’s prophecy, were valleys, mountains, crooked roads, and rough ways. What valleys do we have in our lives? What are the low points for us, times when we are mired in the shadows of the mountains around us, that life is kind of dark and depressing? Have events of life eroded the even-keel, happy-go-lucky attitude that you once had? Are there empty spots in your life where you don’t know what’s missing or what will fill the void that you feel? These are the dark valleys of life.

Is there a mountainous pile of things in your life that are left undone, things you know that you should be doing or should have already done but have not done them? Does your guilt make the pile rise larger and larger with each and every action and word that you have said wrong? Is the litany of what you have done wrong become a mountain of sin that dwarfs you?

Which of my roads, my paths in life, are crooked? Am I walking the straight and narrow, or have I created all sorts of twists and turns by bad decisions? Do I see the straight road of doing what is right and instead create my own path, make my own detour?

As I go along, there are bumps and potholes in the road of life. Things happen that jar you, rattle you. You find yourself at times questioning who you are and what you are doing here. Depending on how big the rough spot is, you question if you can carry on. You question if your faith is enough. You question whether or not God is actually going to come to you.

Because we have valleys of depression and loneliness in our lives, mountains of guilt and sin, crooked roads of wrong-doing, and rough ways of jarring experiences, God sent his word to John. He told John to come preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And so John washed people using the Word of God, and it changed their hearts. It repaired the way for the Lord to come to their lives. His baptism wasn't just an outward cleansing. That baptism turned hearts around from their current paths of sin and depression to repentant hearts consoled and repaired by the forgiveness of sins.

With baptism, the low spots in life are filled in. When I feel all alone, that I am left by myself, baptism fills in that void. Baptism makes me a part of God's family, showing me that I have a proper place with him. I am not unloved or neglected. Quite the opposite. I am a treasured member of his family. The valley, that part of my life that seems to have eroded away has been filled in with the undeserved love of God choosing to adopt me into his family.

I see that mountain of sins in my life. It towers over me, leaving me in the shadows of hopelessness, waiting for it to crash down on me and crush me. I know that there is no way for me to remove that mountain. So God removes it for me. In baptism, he washes away my sins. He wipes them all away in a tidal wave of water destroying my mountain of sin and guilt. It doesn't matter how high my pile of sins has become or how many more yet I will commit in my weakness, God's baptism has wiped them out completely, made my mountain of sin low.

In regards to the crooked roads, baptism straightens them out. My sinful nature is drown in those waters. My heart is changed, turned around, repaired, made repentant. By my baptism, I now want to do what is good and right. I want to serve God. I look at his commands and take them to heart. I find joy in completing them, living by them. This is my way to say thank you to God over and over again is by making my road straight, straight according to his great commands for my life.

Those bumps in life, the rough ways that I experience that jar me and my trust in God, God smooths them out by my baptism. Because I have been baptized, I know where I stand before God. He says that my sins are forgiven. The rough patches are filled in. I have peace with him. No matter what happens in my life, no matter the potholes or the troubling bumps that life gives me, I know that I have tranquility with God. My relationship with him will not be bounced around and shaken up. It is a solid relationship between him and me on account of my baptism.

By this most wondrous gift of baptism, I am repaired. The baptism that he has given me has prepared the way for the Lord in my life. It has straightened me out to God, repairing my heart with the forgiveness of sins. He has filled in the valleys of depression, knocked down the mountains of sin, straightened my crooked roads of behavior with a desire to do what is right, and smoothed out the rough ways in life with the peace of knowing that I stand before God as one who is forgiven. I am prepared for the Lord coming and being in my life, because by baptism God has repaired my life with the forgiveness of sins. Amen.

November 29, 2015

Pastor Jonathan Klein

pastorklein@lightofthevalley-wels.org