**Luke 3:1-20**

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, **2** during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. **3** And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming 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: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. **5**  Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, **6**  and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ” **7** He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? **8** Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. **9** Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” **10** And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” **11** And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” **12**  Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” **13** And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” **14** Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.” **15** As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, **16**  John answered them all, saying, “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. **17** 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.” **18** So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. **19** But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother’s wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, **20** added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

**“A Proactive Preparation”**

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. People know what it means to prepare. We do it practically every day of our life. It happens with the most basic things like with what to eat or what to wear. Parents have the underlining hope to prepare their children to be adults. The church seeks to prepare people for the Lord’s Supper with the practice of confirmation. Sadly, preparation alone does not solve the problems of a sinful world. We end up facing this dilemma when tragedy of any kind falls upon us. Man wants to find a way to prepare for it, but none can.

As if, the shooting last week in San Bernardino, California was not enough. The day after the New York Daily News had to post the headline, “God isn’t fixing this.” Instead of turning to God in time of need, the article was a promo for increased gun control. Whatever side of the fence you might fall for fighting terrorism. Tragedy is something that demands all to turn to God. The Lord seeks sinners to find refuge in Him. Advent means “coming” and that is because God has something to give. The introit said, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it” (Psalms 81:10). More than a mouthful, the message of good news came by way of John in the wilderness. Advent begs the question, “Who is prepared for ‘the way’ of the Lord?”

The way God prepares is unique since none can handle His coming. This is why John arose in the wilderness apart from the plans and strength of men. Out of a place of nothing God’s pure Word brought forth what He promised. In seeing this wonder, many self-satisfied people in Israel came to hear what this prophet had to say. What John proclaimed cut down their status of glory that claimed the right to be children of Abraham. Rather than a secure salvation empty of repentance, God by way of John spoke the Law to their hearts. As the baptizer proclaimed, “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Repentance is the key to the coming of Christ. This gift God prepares by the Law for all people and nations. The unique aspect of repentance is how none is prepared. Whether it be the despairing and skeptical that wallow in the valleys of darkness to deny God. Whether it be the proud and presumptuous that gaze out as gods from hills and mountains of self-made glory. Whether it be sinful ways of crooked and rough roads in life against God’s commandments. None is prepared for the axe of the Law when it comes. Yet, it lays at the root of every person’s life. As St. Paul proclaims, “For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God…” (Romans 3:22-23a). Even Christ will bring a winnowing fork to sift out the unrepentant on the Last Day.

The way God prepares is for any to receive the work of His faithfulness. Since works can save none, all must trust in what God does for us. This is what John brought from God by “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” John brought the Law, but the Gospel was always the goal. It was to receive this good news by trusting in God doing great things for sinners. This became clear finally when Christ underwent judgment for all by way of the cross. By His sacrifice, the Spirit and fire of God’s love made baptism a life giving water. Rather than being a work or decision of man, God made baptism what it is. Any can receive this forgiveness of sins, since it comes from Jesus’ death and resurrection.

As much as this time of the year invokes the battle cries against a secular culture that attacks Christmas. There is a helpful saying I recently read on Facebook. It stated, “Keep Christ in Christmas? Keep Christ in Christianity!” Without Christ bringing forgiveness for sins, without His Word and Sacraments for our lives, without faith in what God promises to do for us. Christianity loses its way, even at Christmas. It misses what God has prepared in that manger for us by His grace. Religions of man center on life in this world that is passing away. Instead, baptism into Christ is glory quenching the fires of sin, death, and the Devil. God forgives and we prepare to receive His faithfulness as that sure foundation. “For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.”

The way God prepares is with fruitfulness of Him in our lives. Good works do not justify, but the justified will do good works. Where there is repentance and forgiveness, it leads to actions of love that are pleasing to God and good for our neighbor. Repentance is a Greek word that means, “A change of heart and mind” or “A turning around.” This is what happened to the crowd when they asked John about what to do. His examples showed what kind of fruit was to be in their life. Those that had more than enough were to share with others. Those that were tax collectors had to avoid stealing in name of the state. Those that were soldiers had to use their authority not to their advantage. All of these vocations finally point to fruitfulness fixed upon acts of mercy.

Rather than serving self, baptism brings forth saints that serve Christ. Where the Old Adam dies, a new Adam now rises up with mercy made right by God’s Son. This is love centered and flowing out from the way God loves us. Good works are not simply a warm feeling or a popular fad for today. This is fruitfulness coming from what God says is good, since His goodness in Christ is what already saves us. St. Paul prayed for such fruit among the Philippian Christians saying that, “your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ…” In other words, this is mercy taking shape in every facet of our life and in every phase of life. These good works are in the present, but keep looking toward the future where Christ will at last gather us into His barn.

Since God tends to stir things up by His coming, are we ready? Is this preparing any different from everything else we do in life? Advent begs the question, “Who is prepared for ‘the way’ of the Lord?” John did the work to set hearts and minds upon Christ. Rather than getting ourselves in order, we are to be ready for how God prepares all things for us. Repentance lets us keep receiving Christ, the Gospel, forgiveness, and eternal life as a gift. Mercy is the fruit, but the tree is faith in Christ that stands. The axe that cut him down on the cross now keeps safe any who trust in Him. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.