

Rorate Coeli

24 December, Anno Domini 2023

St. John 1:19-38

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Blessed of the Lord,

John the Baptizer was given by God to carry out a very specific role in the salvation of the world. He wasn't the Christ but he prepared the way of the One who is. In this season of Advent, a time dedicated specifically to preparation for our Lord's return in glory, it is important for us to understand what true and saving preparation is needed. What, then, does it mean that John prepared the way of the Lord? How was John to prepare the way for the Messiah? Is our preparation today any different since we live so long after John in a different time and a different context?

God in His Word lays out very clearly how John is to prepare people for the Christ. And the nature of that preparation is determined by the nature of the Christ. If you don't prepare the right way, then you can't receive the Christ. Speaking from the Holy Spirit, the prophet Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets before John, writes the following from God concerning the forerunner of the Messiah "Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. **And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.**" (Malachi 4:5-6) With these words, God clearly describes the work of the one He sends as bringing unity to those who were divided. In other words, John was to bring to repentance those who had separated themselves from God's family through sin and unbelief. Likewise in Isaiah chapter 40, (which we heard again last Sunday), God gives this sermon to John to cry out to God's people "**All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the**

people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” (Isaiah 40: 6b-8) What is it to compare men to things as temporary as flowers and grass but to remind them that they are created beings whose time on this earth is extremely temporary? And we are daily reminded of this fact - car accidents, inoperable cancer diagnoses for six and sixty year olds alike, countless numbers of people suddenly and inexplicably dropping over dead or developing a life-altering condition, gangs and thugs firing volleys of bullets through neighborhoods, regular heart attacks among the healthiest and the most elite athletes among us, bombs dropped from drones that wipe out homes and hospitals and churches full of people in an instant. And how often we hear things like “I just can’t believe they died! They were so young.” But, given how mortally sin has wounded all of creation, a more fitting exclamation of surprise would be “I can’t believe that I have survived another day! With all the trouble in the world and the devil’s constant prowling about, it can only be by the grace of God that I am still drawing breath.”

And listen to how John’s own father Zechariah, inspired by the Holy Spirit, perhaps most clearly and beautifully describes the work of his son in this way: “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.” (Luke 1:76-79)

We all associate John with being a preacher of repentance. Why wouldn’t we? He most certainly is. “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance...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.” (Luke 3:7b-8a, 9) And St. Matthew reports this very simple preaching of John “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:2)

It is this repentance which lies at the heart of all true and godly preparation. Repentance is how what is crooked is made straight, how mountains are brought

low and valleys are raised up. All of our loveless thoughts and words and deeds, the mountains of our pride, and our valleys of despair are brought to level through true repentance, that is, sorrow over our sin against the Lord's commandments and fear of God's just and eternal punishment. And such leveling is most certainly not something we can work up in ourselves. Our flesh loves sin and so works tirelessly to gloss over it. We want to minimize God's hatred of sin and so we try to soothe ourselves by arguing that our sin isn't soooo bad. We tell ourselves that "Sure, I made a mistake, as everyone does, but God understands because He knows that deep down I'm really a good person." Worse, we try to explain away our sin and act as though we had no choice in the matter. "The cost is too high. My family won't understand and might not talk to me. My friends will think I'm weird. I might lose my job. I might get labeled as some kind of phobic." We tend to be more sorry that we got caught than that we actually sinned against the holy God before whose throne we must one day give an account.

True repentance can only be worked in us by God when He hems us in and leaves us nor room for escape or excuses. The writers of the Apology to the Augsburg Confession express it this way "We say that contrition is the true terror of conscience, which feels that God is angry with sin and grieves that it has sinned. This contrition takes place when sins are condemned by God's Word." (Ap, AC XII, 29) God, through the proclamation of the divine Law must strike this terror in our hearts. This is a divine work, a work of the Holy Spirit. It is not an artificial feeling that we try to conjure up within ourselves. That would be hypocritical and just as offensive to God as the sin over which we seek to mourn. Rather, this God-pleasing repentance is worked in us as we meditate seriously and honestly upon God's Word, as we take time to examine our lives in light of the Ten Commandments and our own vocations and allow the Law to shine a bright light into our hearts and expose the sin that we wish so desperately to protect from prying eyes. In the Smalcald Articles Dr. Luther speaks of true repentance this way:

"This repentance teaches us to discern sin: We are completely lost; there is nothing good in us from head to foot; and we must become absolutely new and different people. Such repentance is not partial

and fragmentary like that which does penance for actual sins. Nor, like that, is it uncertain. For it does not debate what is or is not sin. Rather, it hurls everything together and says: Everything in us is nothing but sin (there is nothing in us that is not sin and guilt). What is the use of always investigating, dividing, or distinguishing? This contrition is certain. For we cannot think of any good thing to pay for sin. There is nothing left. There is only a sure despairing about all that we are, think, speak, do, and so on. Confession, too, cannot be false, uncertain, or fragmentary. A person who confesses that everything in him is nothing but sin includes all sins, excludes none, forgets none.”
(SA Part 3, III, 35-37)

Only in this way can we truly be prepared to behold and receive the Lamb of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, because He has come to take away the sin of the world. He did not come to establish an earthly kingdom. He did not come in order to establish a pattern whereby, if we worked hard enough, we could save ourselves. He did not come to make you happy, healthy, wealthy, and wise as the world and your flesh know these things. The true Christ came to cover Himself in all the filth and stench of your sin and suffer and die under it so that He could present you as holy and spotless to God, pure as the new-fallen snow. Thus that man is truly worthy and well prepared to receive Christ who has been crushed by the weight of God’s wrath as a stone that has been crushed into powder by a hammer, who has been brought to know and confess without hesitation or excuse his own unworthiness before God, who acknowledges that God speaks perfect truth when He says there is nothing but wicked intent in the heart of man.

This is what John and our Lord Himself call for when with one voice they cry out “Repent!” They are not seeking a piece-meal, dance around the bush kind of repentance. Rather a full-throated confession that “I am a sinner through and through. I have nothing to boast of before God, nothing to hold up in payment for my rebellion, nothing to merit His favor. I am but a poor, wretched beggar whose only hope is that God is merciful to sinners like me who deserve nothing but wrath and displeasure, temporal death and eternal damnation.”

To such a one John the Baptist rejoices to say “I am not the Christ. But Jesus IS the Christ who takes away your sins! HE has made full atonement for you. You have been washed, purified, sanctified in HIS precious Name. He is the righteousness of God that has rained down from heaven above to bring refreshment to parched and thirsty souls who long for salvation. He has come to lift the heavy and terrible burden of your sins from your heart and fill you instead with the joy of forgiveness, the peace of His cross, and the hope of eternal life. Listen to His Words which bid you ‘Come to Me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.’ From Moses’ mouth you came to know the terror of the Law. You have rightly wept under it’s judgment. From the mouth of Jesus, the Prophet born of the Virgin Mary, comes the sweet and life-giving Words of the Gospel ‘Take, eat; take, drink; this is My Body and Blood shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sins.’

Children of God, give great attention to the Word of God as you await the day of our Lord’s return. By so doing, you have the promise of God that He will work a life of repentance and faith in you, welling up to good works. In this way you may receive Him when He comes again in glory as your long awaited Savior rather than the terrible judge who will give to all who rejected Him the just and eternal punishment for their sins. Do not guard your hearts against the strict demands of the Law so that somehow you can maintain some righteousness of your own. God grant to you by His Holy Spirit through the Word such true and God-pleasing repentance that you may find the greatest joy in the one who was born for us, who died for us, and who is coming again soon to gather His beloved children into the eternal mansions.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.