

## Prepare for the LORD

- ☆ Hope in repentance (vv.1-6)
- ☆ Honesty in repentance (vv.7-12)

In the Name of Jesus our coming Savior, whose Advent calls for careful preparation, my fellow penitents:

How much did you think about Advent this week? Did you mention Advent to anyone and get blank stares? How many people know what “Advent” means? If you don’t tell them Christ is coming, who will? But if “Advent” is all about everyone else preparing, will you be ready? Christ’s “Advent” on Judgment Day is nearer now than last time you were in church – seven days or seven years ago. **Hope** and **Honesty** the Holy Spirit is giving us today, all wrapped up in **repentance**. God never tells us to get ready tomorrow. Today **Prepare for the LORD**. Get ready God’s way for awesome blessings. First...

### ☆ Hope in repentance (vv.1-6)

*In those days, John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, <sup>2</sup>“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!” <sup>3</sup>Yes, this is he of whom this was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.”*

Imagine travel without roads? Gravel farm roads are still more permanent than foot trails. The Romans engineered imperial highways to move emperors and troops. Careful planning, building up the base layer, providing drainage kept ancient “highways” from disappearing. Otherwise flash floods brought vegetation right back. Well watered Galilee underbrush could disappear roads in no time. Kings needed engineers to go ahead of them. Likewise the Lord’s prophet clears our underbrush of sin, levels depressions of despair and overgrown heights of pride for Christ to come with His kingdom of blessings.

To grab everyone’s attention, God sent John the Baptist as the last prophet of the Old Testament, a strange messenger much like Elijah seven centuries before. <sup>4</sup>*John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.* In those days men wore robes, so a man needed a belt to keep from walking up the inside of his robe. Think how religious pride can trip us up if we try to hide under our feelings instead hiding by faith in God’s clear and simple Word. *“Girding up your loins,”* meant *pulling up your robes*, to run the way of the Lord’s commandments. In faith’s readiness and reckless abandonment we are not tripped up by sin or self-righteousness.

<sup>5</sup>*Then Jerusalem, all of Judea, and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him – practically “pouring out” to see John. It had been 400 years of silence since the prophet Malachi. God’s chosen people were hungry for word of their promised Messiah. John the Baptist gave them much more. <sup>6</sup>They were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins – hoping for grace.*

We need to let go in reckless abandonment and leave everything behind for Advent. **Prepare for the Lord** by **Hope in repentance**. We worship the God of grace and mercy who welcomes such weak and miserable sinners that we know there’s room for us too. **“Repentance”** means a change of heart that leaves all care behind and nestles like a baby in her mother’s arms. Only in Christ, we are cuddled close to the loving heart of our heavenly Father. He gives us such a sense of total freedom. It’s been called the “heroic effort of your life.” You fling yourself in reckless confidence on God. God has ventured all in Jesus Christ to save us. Now He wants us to venture our all in abandoned confidence in Him. New life in Christ can face anything without wavering. You come up against another problem, then give it up to God. You abandon resolutely all self pride as Jesus Christ demands. You risk everything you hold by

“common sense” and leap into what God says. ***“The Scripture cannot be broken”*** (John 10:35) – not by economic hard times, not by hard hearted relatives. Christ demands of all who trust Him this reckless spirit that dares to step out of the crowd and bank faith’s confidence on God’s character. <sup>1</sup>

And yet, Christianity is not a “blind leap of faith” as some theologians call it. Thousands of years of Old Testament Scriptures record hundreds of God’s promises. He faithfully kept every single one, even at the cost of His own shed blood, His only Son’s innocent suffering and death. Jesus is why we have **Hope in repentance**. Even when we’re terribly ashamed of our sins, we keep hoping in God’s goodness which took all those sins away. We don’t despair like Judas; we humble ourselves and wait on God like Peter. **Prepare for the LORD** as you imitate the faith of Abraham the father of all believers. Of him Luther said, *“He hid himself in the darkness of faith, and there he found eternal light.”* <sup>2</sup> **Prepare by...**

### ☆ **Honesty in repentance (vv.7-12)**

Overconfident kings have been beheaded. Sated armies and empires fell. Governments that failed to care for bodies have drowned like churches that neglected souls. So often others see right through us while we keep fooling ourselves. We desperately need **Honesty in repentance**.

Neither John nor Jesus as He came preaching spared any words of warning on people, politicians or churchmen: When John *saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup>Therefore produce fruit in keeping with repentance! <sup>9</sup>Do not think of saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. <sup>10</sup>Already the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”* Do you think church membership can save you? **Honesty in repentance...**!

John concluded his sermon: *“I baptize you with water for repentance. But the one who comes after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup>His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”* **Honesty in repentance** makes no excuses, but freely confesses and forsakes them – publicly here together, privately alone with the Lord. He sees our secret sins, so with David we cry out, *“Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults.”* (Ps 19:12 NIV84) In the Absolution God’s forgiveness removes sin’s cancerous growth in our hearts and lives. Washed clean in the blood of Jesus, we live!

The Holy Spirit tells us in Christ’s church there is only **“one baptism.”** (Ephesians 4:5). Jesus would baptize **“with the Holy Spirit”** in a miraculous outpouring on Pentecost and continues to give the Holy Spirit in baptism’s **“washing of rebirth and renewal.”** (Titus 3:4-7) John explains how Jesus will baptize **“with fire”** in the next verse. *“His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”* This is Judgment Day, the second and final Advent of Christ our King. All who reject His salvation will abandon hope in unending torment, God’s warning since time began. (Jude 14-16)

**Prepare for the LORD** with **“fruit in keeping with repentance.”** These are good works only a Christian can do because **“without faith it is impossible to please God.”** (Hebrews 11:6) By faith, Christ makes you into a good tree that can’t help bearing good fruit. You work hard, care for your family, pray for your church and pastors, lend a hand whenever you can. All the while our beautiful Savior produces in you **“the fruit of the Spirit [which] is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...”** (Galatians 5:22f) Jesus gives us true repentance. He prepares our hearts through John the Baptist and all His faithful prophets. **Hope** and **Honesty in repentance** are God’s pre-Christmas gifts to you. Soon your heart will swell with joy to hold the Christ Child. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Chambers, Oswald, *My Utmost For His Highest*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1935, p. 151.

<sup>2</sup> Luther, Martin. (EA op ex4,136) Quoted by Sasse in “Luther’s Theology of the Cross.” See LW, Vol. 3, on Genesis 17:16.

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