

Sermon Draft

Text: Luke 3:1–14 (15–20)

Sermon: “Heart Ready”

The world gets ready for this season on one level, Christians on another. The world gets ready for just one great big blockbuster of a day on Christmas, kind of an annual consumer feeding frenzy, indulging itself in stuff and more stuff. Then when it’s over, it’s over. And all that’s left of Christmas on December 26 is a big pile of wrapping paper and trips to the store for after-Christmas sales.

Not so in the Church. For us, when Christmas comes, it stays. It lingers on through Epiphany, the Gentiles’ Christmas, and all the way clear through till Lent. We continue to ponder the great glad news that God has become man to redeem all humankind out from under the iron grip of death and hell. And we will sing our Christmas praises well into January and beyond. We make Christmas last.

But Christmas hasn’t yet begun; we’re still in Advent. We’re still getting ready. Yet our readiness is much more than just sending cards and decorating our homes and going to parties.

It is a readiness of the heart that God desires at his coming. That's why in our Collect this day we pray: ***“Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son.”***

In our text, God gives us exactly that: a ready heart, through the prophet of the Advent, a familiar figure, John by name. He is the very prophet whom the Lord appointed to clear the way for his coming. And he indeed cleared the way.

Nothing mealy mouthed about John, and no tiptoeing around for him. Sometimes I wish I were more like John. He marched right in where angels feared to tread and laid it on the line to all who heard him: ***“Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees,”*** he announced. All the dead wood was to be cut out of the Lord's forest. ***“Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire”*** (v 9).

Now that's a little unsettling, if we have the ears to hear it. And it should be. For the sad truth is that more often than not, you and I don't produce the good fruit our Lord expects.

We simply don't love God with all our heart and soul and strength, much less love our neighbor as ourselves. Despite our best efforts, there are those we have hurt and those we have failed to help. Our thoughts and desires are soiled with sin. There is nothing good within us, in our sinful nature.

That's how preparing the way for the Lord's coming begins, when you and I are laid low by the hammer blows of God's Law, so that we might be lifted up and comforted by the Gospel of God's grace in Christ Jesus, his Son. The way of the Lord is the way of repentance. That is, it calls for change. A change of mind and heart, which only God can work within us by the power of his Spirit working through his Word.

That's what we need this Advent season: a change so that we can straighten up—straighten up our hearts and lives, clean out our messed-up hearts so cluttered with sin, and clear out our lives, littered with shame and death, so that they might be filled to overflowing with the life of Jesus Christ instead.

Not that such a change comes easy, mind you. It means the death of the habits of the sinful heart. And such habits always die hard. It's always much easier to love and serve ourselves than it is to love and serve God and our neighbor for Jesus' sake.

It always comes naturally to the sinful heart to lash out with anger when we're hurt, to return evil for evil, to repay injury with injury. It is much easier to cut down other people than to love them and build them up. It's easier for the sinful heart to curse and swear, to lie and deceive by God's name, than to pray, praise, and give him thanks.

That's why the way of the Lord leads first to the cross before it leads to joy. That's why the Christian life is a life of constant repentance, a continuing vigil for change in mind and heart. We confess our sins, then God ***"is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"*** (1 John 1:9). First the cross and then the crown. Such is the way, the road, we walk.

And that road often takes some unexpected twists and turns. It might take us through some rocky terrain and rugged territory, places we would rather not go. The road of faith may lead us out even into desert lands, where it seems we walk alone all by ourselves.

But we are not alone even there. The very God who washed away our sins and gave us life will not abandon us in those desert times. He who gave up his life for us on his cross and shed his blood to wash our robes and make them white will never let us go. *“My sheep know me,” says Jesus, “and I know them. And they follow me. And I will give them eternal life. And no man will ever snatch them out of my hand”* (see John 10:1–15).

The path we walk might seem rugged at times and very steep, the pathway long and hard, but it is the path of the Lord’s own coming. The voice of John, the Lord’s prophet, cries out to one and all: **“Then cleansed be ev’ry life from sin; Make straight the way for God within, And let us all our hearts prepare For Christ to come and enter there”** (LW 14:2).

So, let's stir up our hearts this Advent season. It's time for a change, a new way. Let's lift up the valleys of our deep despair, bring down the mountain peaks of our lofty pride, and straighten out our crooked ways.

What this mean, well it means different things for different people, depending on who they are and where they are in life. You can tell that from John's instructions to those who heard his preaching. For tax collectors, the way of the Lord meant to be honest; for soldiers, it meant to be content and not take what didn't belong to them. For everyone, it meant generosity and mercy, giving food and clothing to those who had none, for Jesus' sake. But how is this done: by the grace of God, that's how.

The Son of God, who came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, will change our hearts and make them new. He who left the Father's throne in lowly meekness to be cradled in a cattle trough and wrapped in swaddling clothes is closer in his Word to us than a little child with his arms wrapped around our neck.

This Lord Jesus will sweep the cobwebs out of our hearts and make them fit for his coming. He will straighten up the crooked paths by which we have wandered far away from our Father's house and bring us home again. He will tear down our stubborn pride and melt our hardened hearts to enfold us in his love. He will lift us up out of the pits of our despair and grief to comfort us with the presence of his Holy Spirit and restore to us the joy of his salvation.

So, get ready. Get ready for Christmas most certainly, but above all else prepare your hearts for the coming of Christ. Let this holy Advent season be your comfort and your joy as deep within takes root the reality that Christ has actually come in the flesh and will come again at the end of time. But he comes this very day in his Gospel and Sacrament to make us new and whole and free.

So, prepare the way for his coming. Let this be our constant Advent prayer: *“Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of your only-begotten Son.”*

Come, Holy Spirit. *“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me”* (Psalm 51:10). **“Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child, Make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled, Within my heart, that it may be A quiet chamber kept for Thee”** (*TLH* 85:13).

Come, Lord Jesus, quickly come. Amen