

After Darkness Light

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 5:3 ESV)*

*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”
(Matthew 7:24–25 ESV)*

A People Prepared For The Lord

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Luke 1:1-17

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you I'd invite you to open it now to Luke 1:1-17. This is the first Sunday in Advent and it is traditional in the church to slow down a little bit as we approach Christmas Day to think about the wonder of his coming. That's what the word "advent" means – it means "coming" or "arrival". And so we often talk about everything that led up to the FIRST COMING, in part, so that we can be properly prepared for THE NEXT COMING.

Are you EAGER for the SECOND COMING OF THE LORD today, my friends? I am. More so than I have EVER BEEN BEFORE. And so I am looking forward to this series because I want to be prepared. I want to be ready. I want to be LOOKING for the return of the Lord.

Toward that end we are going to be looking at the first 17 verses in Luke's Gospel this morning – but also, the several centuries of exile and silence leading up to those 17 verses because you can't make sense of these verses – you can't make sense of John the Baptist without thinking about all the process – all the hardship – all the preparation that came before. So we're working with a

wide angle lens this morning – but we will begin with the beginning of Luke’s Gospel. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us,² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us,³ it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

Just briefly, by way of introduction, the Gospel of Luke was written, along with the Acts of the Apostles, by Luke the Physician, the travelling companion of the Apostle Paul. He was an educated man and he interviewed many of the eyewitnesses in order to create a Gospel account, that we assume, formed the basis for much of the Apostle Paul’s outreach and ministry.

Incidentally, the fact that most of our favourite Christmas stories are found in Luke’s Gospel is likely due to the fact that, according to church history, Luke interviewed MARY – Jesus’ mother – extensively before writing his account. I think that will become rather obvious to you as we make frequent use of Luke’s Gospel over the course of this Christmas season – but we need to jump back into the text.

Verse 5 says:

⁵In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. ⁷But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. ⁸Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. ¹³But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,

15 for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

Let me just pause here to explain that: abstinence from wine and strong drink was demanded for priests while they were on duty – so this is a way of saying that JOHN WILL ALWAYS BE ON DUTY. He will have no PERSONAL LIFE. John will never marry. He will never go to parties – he can't drink, so he can't go to weddings. John will not have a social life – he will have a mission – and for John, the mission will be everything. In verse 16 we learn about that mission:

16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." (Luke 1:1–17 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

To make ready for the Lord a people prepared – “a people prepared” that's what I want to focus on this morning.

How does God prepare people to meet the Lord?

The people in the Old Testament WERE NOT PREPARED to meet the Lord. The prophets make that very clear. Amos the prophet REBUKED people for looking forward to the Day of the Lord. He said:

“Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD?” (Amos 5:18 ESV)

“Are you nuts?”, Amos asked. “Why would you want the Day of the Lord? Why would you want God to come? Do you think he is going to high five you? Do you think he is going to slap you on the back and give you a medal? Do you want to know what he thinks of you? I'll tell you. He says:

“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.”
(Amos 5:21 ESV)

God is NOT PLEASED with where you are at right now – so you don’t want him to come. If he comes right now it will be to GRIND YOU DOWN TO DUST. You are not prepared to receive your Lord and Master.”

Are we prepared?

How can we GET PREPARED?

That’s the question I’m asking this morning – and that is the sort of question that Advent encourages us to ask. Advent is about looking at the FIRST COMING of the Lord so as to prepare for the NEXT. So let’s do that. Looking at this whole story – the story, that stretches all the way from the rebuke of the prophets in the OT to the birth, life and ministry of John the Baptist in the NT – looking at that story I want to ask the question:

How Does God Prepare People To Properly Receive The Lord?

I think the first answer has to be this:

1. Through exile

Near the end of the Old Testament through prophets like Amos, God delivered several scathing indictments against the covenant community. In Amos 2:6-8 he said:

⁶“For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—
⁷ those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and turn aside the way of the afflicted; a man and his father go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned;

⁸ they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge, and in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fined. (Amos 2:6–8 ESV)

You are cruel to the poor, you abuse the vulnerable, you act in disgusting and perverted ways – and you dare to do it all in my name – you make RELIGIOUS JUSTIFICATION for your wicked behaviour.

Enough!

“Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:23–24 ESV)

So God shut them down. The northern tribes were taken into exile by Assyria and then a short while later the southern tribes were taken into exile for 70 years in Babylon.

Sometimes, when the covenant community gets hopelessly off track in their life and worship of God, there is no other option, but to shut them down.

The second thing we see in this story is an extended season of silence.

2. Through silence

Amos predicted that as well. Amos 8:11-12 says:

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord GOD, “when I will send a famine on the land— not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it.” (Amos 8:11–12 ESV)

There was a 400 year silence between the close of Old Testament prophecy and the voice of John the Baptist in the New; did you know that?

For 400 years, people were wondering: “What in the world is going on? What is the will of the Lord? What is God’s plan? Is he just going to leave us here in the dark? Will he ever come and do for us the things he promised long ago to do?”

400 years.

They sat in silence – in the dark – asking those kinds of questions.

It was almost like God was saying: “You weren’t listening to me so I stopped talking.”

For a while, probably, no one even noticed, but then, after a while the silence was deafening. And people got hungry. They got thirsty. They got desperate – and still God made them wait. Sometimes awkward silences are restorative. Sometimes it is GOOD when we don’t get an answer to our prayers because that makes us ask some really good questions:

“God is there something I am doing that I shouldn’t be doing?”

“God is there something in my life that makes it unwise for you to prosper me?”

“Lord am I in the right place right now as a person for you to bless me?”

Those are good questions and people only tend to ask those kinds of questions when God is silent.

And God was silent for a long time, in those days, but good, pious, believing people like Elizabeth and Zechariah were still going through the routine of faithful life and service. They were still standing where God told them to stand and doing what God told them to do.

That's the third thing we notice in this story.

3. Through routine

Look again at the start of this story. Look at verse 5:

“In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah.” (Luke 1:5 ESV)

Everything about that is interesting. The name “Zechariah” actually means “Yahweh remembers”. So whoever gave him that name was a person of faith who remembered something about the faithfulness of the Lord.

But it also says here that Zechariah was a priest of the division of Abijah. Originally, before the double exile to Assyria and Babylon, there had been 24 divisions of priests, scattered throughout the whole land of Israel, north and south. But after the exile only 4 of the original 24 divisions were part of the return – but they redivided so as to at least mimic the original intention and design – and they prayed and acted on behalf of the entire nation – even though the nation by this point was but a shell of its former self.

Regardless, as part of this 24 part division, each division of priests would rotate on duty in the temple compound for 2 weeks out of every year. So every year, on his rotation, Zechariah would go about his duties – as if God was still listening and as if he still cared.

And that was an open question in Zechariah's day. When Solomon dedicated the original temple, the glory of the Lord descended visibly upon it – do you remember that? The priests were literally slain in the spirit – they fell down – they could not minister because the presence of the Lord was so palpable.

But nothing like that happened in the rededicated SECOND TEMPLE that was standing in Zechariah's day. There had been no display. There was no assurance of his presence.

And yet still – they went through the motions. In faith - they kept doing what God had told them to do, the way God told them to do it – where God told them to do it. Believing in their hearts that one day he would come – one day he would show up and he would speak.

That's what it means to WAIT on the Lord.

It means to keep doing what he told you to do – it means to trust the process – it means to stick with the plan – it means to attend to the ordinary means – until HE COMES. That's GOOD FOR YOU. That's RESTORATIVE. That's PREPARATORY and we see that in this story.

So God prepares us to meet the Lord through exile, silence and routine – and then fourthly, he prepares us through retreat.

4. Through retreat

We see that clearly in the ministry of John the Baptist. In Luke 3:4 Luke describes him as:

“The voice of one crying **in the wilderness**: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” (Luke 3:4 ESV)

Matthew adds a little more colour and detail, he says:

“Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were **going out to him**, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” (Matthew 3:4–6 ESV)

John was a man OF THE DESERT – he was a voice crying OUT in the desert. John had to SEPARATE from the culture in order to speak usefully to it.

And he did – he spoke from the outside.

He didn't just repeat what all the cultural insiders were saying – he probably didn't even KNOW what the cultural insiders were saying – because he was living in a cave eating locusts in the desert! He didn't hear anything – he couldn't hear anything out there - EXCEPT the Word of the Lord!

That's the only way you can function as a reformer – you've got to get away from the noise – to hear again the voice of the Lord.

I think that's something we need to understand again in the evangelical church in North America. I think we are no longer able to distinguish the voice of the Lord from the voice of our favourite cable news stations. I think we are no longer able to distinguish the voice of the Lord from the voice of our favourite political parties – or from our favourite internet celebrities. We are all TRAGICALLY INTERMINGLED NOW.

And I don't think the answer to that is DECONSTRUCTION – but I do think the answer has to involve some effort at DISENTANGLEMENT – and to do that – we need to prioritize RETREAT. We need to take extended BREAKS from MEDIA and from the noise and din of the PUBLIC SQUARE – we need RETREATS for extended times in prayer, fasting, silence and meditation on God's Word.

I worry that if we don't do this, we won't be prepared for the coming of the Lord. We will be looking the wrong way, expecting the wrong thing, pursuing the wrong causes, and maybe even worshipping the wrong Christ.

We need to break away. We need retreat. We need voices in and from the wilderness if we are going to be ready to meet the Lord.

We need to HEAR those voices and we need to allow ourselves to be REBUKED by them. That's the fifth thing I am taking away from this story.

5. Through rebuke

As we already read, everybody – all Jerusalem, all Judea, all the region about the Jordan, were going out to John in the desert – they wanted to hear from the outsider. They wanted to hear from the guy who was hearing from God – and this is what he said to them; Luke 3:7-8:

“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.” (Luke 3:7–8 ESV)

That's not a super welcoming message! I mean, imagine if our ushers greeted you on a Sunday morning by saying: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come!” But that's what John said and he had something for everybody. He said:

“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.” (Luke 3:11–14 ESV)

Everyone who came RECEIVED CORRECTION – because that's PART OF HOW GOD PREPARES PEOPLE TO MEET THE LORD – will you receive that?

Will you ALLOW yourself to be REBUKED and CORRECTED by the text?

I am convinced that this is THE QUESTION OF THE HOUR for this generation of the church of Jesus Christ in North America: Are WE going to CORRECT THE TEXT or are we going to allow OURSELVES to be corrected by the text?

That's the question.

The text says:

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; **male and female he created them.** (Genesis 1:27 ESV)

MALE AND FEMALE – HE – CREATED THEM – do you believe that? WILL YOU believe that when every inside voice in the CULTURE tells you not to believe that? Will you believe that if you came here this morning NOT BELIEVING THAT?

That's the question.

The text also says though:

“Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” (1 Peter 2:17 ESV)

The text says: treat everyone with respect. Love other believes. Fear God and honour your earthly authorities.

What about that? Do you believe that? Because the funny thing is that MANY of the people who believe the FIRST TEXT I SHOWED YOU – DON'T BELIEVE or WON'T BELIEVE this second one.

But they're both here.

That's my point. The text has a correction FOR EVERYONE – will you receive it? Or will you only agree with it – when it agrees with you?

As I said, that is the question of the hour – because CORRECTION is one of the main ways that God prepares people to meet the Lord.

And it is a kindness, because you don't want to be this guy on judgment day; you don't want to be the guy who says:

‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’²³ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ (Matthew 7:22–23 ESV)

There are a lot of religious people out there – a lot of ENTHUSIASTIC RELIGIOUS PEOPLE out there – who are NOT ready to meet Jesus because they do not – they will not – KEEP the Word of Jesus, rather they just do religious things that feel right to them in the NAME OF JESUS – but that's exactly the problem that the prophets were rebuking in the 8th century BC! Those people weren't ready for the Day of the Lord – and I suspect – I fear – I worry – brothers and sisters – that perhaps, neither are we.

I. Howard Marshall says here:

“The people who are prepared for their God are those who have learned to live in peace and righteousness with one another.”¹

Is that us, brothers and sisters? Is that the Christian church in North America?

I fear it is not. Not always. Not generally. Not broadly. And therefore, we may need exile, we may need silence, we may need routine, we may need retreat, we definitely need rebuke and we absolutely need repentance.

6. Through repentance

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel Of Luke* in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 60.

That's our last thing. But it was John's FIRST THING – it was his MAIN THING. Matthew 3:1-2 says:

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² “**Repent**, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:1–2 ESV)

That was his first word! The first thing John the Baptist said when people came to hear the prophet in the wilderness was REPENT!

Turn around!!

You are going the wrong way!!

That's the mission that was given to John the Baptist – that's the mission that the Angel Gabriel DECLARED in the Holy Place to John's father Zechariah. Look at Luke 1:16-17 again:

“And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, **to turn the hearts** of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” (Luke 1:16–17 ESV)

Are you seeing that?

TO TURN THE HEARTS!!!

That's the Greek word *ep-ee-stref-o* – it literally means to turn people around again – because they are going the wrong way!!!! They were running headlong into conflict! Children and parents were running in opposite directions. The church of the day was running in different directions from the church of the past – Luke is quoting here from Malachi 4:5-6 which says:

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” (Malachi 4:5–6 ESV)

“Somebody is going to have to come before I come”, God says, “lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

That was John’s job. Turn some people around so that they were prepared to SEE and EMBRACE the coming of the Lord in the person of Jesus Christ.

And it worked.

Luke TELLS US that it worked. In Luke 7 after Jesus says some stuff to a mixed crowd Luke says:

“When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John,³⁰ but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.” (Luke 7:29–30 ESV)

Do you see that? Those who had been turned by John SAW and CELEBRATED JESUS – but those who didn’t – those who did not repent under the teaching of John – did not see and celebrate Jesus, on the contrary, they opposed him.

They weren’t ready.

They were not prepared.

And so the coming of the Lord for them was a day of utter judgment. He saw them. He weighed them. He rejected them – as they rejected him.

They rejected the purpose of God for themselves – not having been baptized by John.

What a tragedy!

And what a reminder to the likes of us – people waiting and watching for the return of the Lord. We need to ask ourselves today: are we ready? Are we like the Pharisees and the lawyers – schooled in the wisdom of the day – convinced by the spirit of the age – preferring the message that they heard back in the city and therefore rejecting the purposes of God? Or are we like the tax collectors and the prostitutes who went out to the desert, received the rebuke, repented of their sins, were baptized under John and who rejoiced in the coming of their Lord and Saviour?

Who are we, brothers and sisters?

Blessed are the poor in spirit – blessed are those who have been pushed to the margins of this corrupt society, blessed are those who wait patiently upon the Lord, blessed are those who are easily corrected, blessed are those who tremble before the Word of the Lord, blessed are those who are eager and prepared to greet their Master – for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Thanks be to God! Let's pray together.