

Prepare the Way

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[0 : 0 0] Welcome again. Good morning. I'm Tommy. I'm one of the pastors here. We're looking at the gospel according to Luke, and we come this week to a very interesting place, Luke chapter 3, looking at a very strange man, quite frankly, named John, a man whom we refer to as John the Baptist. Even though this is a guy who lived 2,000 years ago and in any society would be considered odd, his message is incredibly relevant and vital. His entire ministry was about preparing the world for the coming of Jesus, preparing the world for the coming of Jesus. And what his message and ministry, what they show us is that Christianity is not simply a set of beliefs that we adopt or a set of life principles that we build into our daily lives. Christianity is ultimately about a spiritual event, a spiritual event that impacts everything, the way we see the world, the way we see ourselves, the way we think about what it means to live a good life, the way we think about things like politics, a spiritual event that radically reshapes all of that. And because it's a spiritual event, it requires of all of us a spiritual response. And so that's what we're going to look at this morning, Luke 3, 1 to 22, the message and the ministry of John the Baptist.

What does Jesus' coming mean? Why are we unprepared to receive Him? Even many of us here who call ourselves Christians. And then finally, how do we get prepared to receive Christ? What does the coming of Jesus mean? Why are so many of us unprepared to receive Him? And how do we get prepared? Let's pray.

Lord, we thank You for Your Word, but Your Word alone as written text on a page is not enough. We need Your Holy Spirit to illuminate Your Word, and we need Your Word to point us to the living Word, Jesus Christ. It is because He has come and is here in our midst that is the source of our hope.

The entire reason we've gathered here this morning is not simply to see one another or to sing or to pray, but ultimately to see You, to receive You. And we pray that You would prepare us through Your Word to do just that. In Your Son's name, amen. So what does the coming of Jesus mean? Luke opens by telling us a little historical context. He tells us that all these events are taking place during the reign of Tiberius Caesar. He says that this is Tiberius' 15th year as Caesar, meaning that this is right around A.D. 28 or 29. So this isn't the kind of story that begins once upon a time in a far-off land.

We know from history that this is right around A.D. 28 or 29. And what we need to understand is this society is very similar to our own society in a number of ways. It's a very diverse society.

[3 : 0 9] It's a highly multicultural society. And it's a very religiously pluralistic society. Lots of different religions that coexist in the same space in the Roman Empire. But this is a point in history where many of the old religions and traditions and ways of doing life are dying. There's a generational divide. There's the older generation that wants to keep to the ways of the forefathers.

And then there's the kind of new generation that is rising up. And they're questioning all of those old mores and traditions and superstitions, some might say. They're wondering if there might be a different way, right? A different source, a different place to put their hope. Many of the old religions are dying. And so people are looking for new sources of hope, new places to find meaning. So it's just like today, right? And what we need to recognize is that that kind of thing is always happening in every generation. But one of the fastest growing religions, one of the new religions that was attracting a lot of followers at this point in history was the cult of emperor worship.

People worshiped the Roman emperors as divine beings. This only started happening about 20 years before Jesus was born. So it's a very new religion, and yet it's the fastest growing religion in that society. So all of these terms that we think of as Christian terms actually originated there. Caesar was the son of God who came as the one who could offer salvation, the Lord and Savior of the world. Caesar was the one who had brought peace on earth by establishing the Pax Romana,

which up until that point in history it was unheard of to have such a vast swath of the known world be essentially peaceful, where various people groups under Roman occupation were at peace with one another, which allowed for all kinds of infrastructure and commerce to develop. If you asked the Roman people, who is Lord, they would say without hesitating, Caesar is Lord. Caesar is our divine Lord. And before it was a Christian idea, the day of the Lord, what we think of as Sunday, the day of the Lord's day, the Lord's day was actually a day that was regularly set aside in the Roman calendar to worship and give thanks to the emperor as the divine bringer of peace on earth. So emperor worship was a quickly growing religion. So at this point in history, many people are worshipping Tiberius as their

Lord and Savior, which is hard for us to get our minds around in some ways. And into this milieu, emerging from the wilderness like a ghost from Israel's past, comes this mysterious man named John, who begins to preach, I hope you understand, a very politically charged message.

[6 : 15] He quotes from Isaiah 40, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. And Isaiah 40 is all about the promise that one day God is going to send a king unlike any king anyone has ever seen.

Because when this king comes, all of the valleys will rise up to meet him. All of the mountains will bow down before him. All of creation will unfurl itself like a red carpet to welcome this king home. And then he says, all flesh will see the salvation of God. This is no ethnic king or regional king. This is a global king who comes to offer salvation to everyone. In other words, this king is the true Lord and Savior of the world. God's king. And that's the meaning of Jesus' baptism at the end of this passage, when God speaks those words to Jesus. You are my son. With you I am well pleased. He is identifying Jesus as his chosen king. Lots of implications here. Right? Underneath all of the problems of the world that we care so much about, all of the broken relationships, all of the systemic injustice, all of the violence and oppression, all of the sickness and the suffering and the natural disasters, the core problem of the world is that it needs its true king. It needs not just a king or a good king, but the true king. And in our society, we have to admit that's a very hard idea to connect with, because in our country, the idea of monarchy is something to be rebelled against. That's why we exist as a country. And so we think of a monarch, we think of a king, and we immediately, we cannot imagine a king without thinking of tyranny, without thinking of a totalitarian regime, without thinking of someone who will undoubtedly abuse their power. So the idea of a good king or a true king is very alien to us on one level. And democracy in our country is necessary. I very much believe in the necessity of democracy because human beings are evil. And none of us are really fit to rule.

And so we need monarchy. But underneath that, the Bible says that we actually need a king, that we were built for a king. And if you look at the old myths, the old myths, myths like the Arthurian legend, right, about a king who is lost, who will one day return and put the world right.

Or if you look at the new myths, you say, what are the new myths? Well, look at the popularity of, for instance, superhero stories. I mean, what are superhero myths, if not modern retellings of the Arthurian legend? There is a good and true and powerful being, and when that being comes, they will have the ability to fix all that is wrong in the world, to rescue us, to offer hope to humanity. That is the longing that we have for our true king expressed in myth. There's inside us all this ancient collective memory of a once and future king.

[9 : 58] I think that at some point we all, in our kind of collective psyche, know instinctively that at some point long ago there was an ancient king who ruled with justice and mercy and compassion and power, and that the only hope we really have is for that king to return.

The philosopher Peter Kreeft says, Though we do not have kings in America or want them, our unconscious mind both has and wants them. We all know what a true king is, a real king, an ideal king, an archetypal king.

He's not a mere politician or soldier. Something in us longs to give him our loyalty and fealty and service and obedience. He is lost but longed for and will someday return like Arthur.

The once and future king. So the Bible would say that in our hearts we are longing for the true king to come. And I believe this is why human beings have such a tendency to put other human beings up on a pedestal and to worship them.

Right? This is why you say, well, why would people worship Caesar? Well, it's because we're longing for a true king. And he'll do. This is why when we look a little bit later in our passage in verse 15, people start to ask themselves if John the Baptist is the Christ.

[11 : 29] Right? Here's another really good guy, really good leader, love what he has to say. Maybe I can put all my hope in him. Maybe he's the Savior. Right? This is why I think in our country some people can tend to worship our political leaders.

It happens on the left and the right. It happened with President Obama. It happens certainly with President Trump. This kind of religious ardor, this devotion, this kind of worship. He will save us. He's God's man. He will do what this world needs to be done. It happens also with celebrities. It happens with self-help gurus.

It happens with religious leaders and pastors. Somebody's a particularly effective speaker, particularly charismatic. People adore that person. They travel across the country to hear that person speak.

Maybe to touch the hem of their garment. But the thing that we really need, what's under all of this longing, the reason we're so quick to worship and elevate other people to a kind of idealized status is because what we really need is the rightful king to return.

[12 : 31] But the question that John raises is the one that we really need to wrestle with. When that king comes, will we be prepared to receive him? In other words, why are so many of us unprepared to receive Jesus?

And the answer is this. In order to receive Jesus, we have to recognize that Jesus is a king. And we have to treat him like a king.

And if you're anything like me, that's where the problem starts. John uses very strong language with the crowds coming to see him. You know, you can imagine this man coming out of the wilderness eating locusts and he starts to preach and he has crowds of people coming to him and saying he might be the Christ.

And how does he respond to them, right? He doesn't start a megachurch there at the Jordan. He calls them a brood of vipers, right? Which is not a seeker-sensitive response.

And what he's essentially saying is he's calling them children of the serpent. He's calling them children of Satan. You're the offspring of Satan. You're a brood of vipers, right?

[13 : 40] And to be a child of Satan means that your life is rooted in the great lie of Satan. In other words, your life is the offspring.

It is shaped by, it has inherited the lie that Satan planted in humanity all the way back in creation. If you go back and you read the account of the fall, the serpent does not come to Adam and Eve and try to convince them to go out and do all kinds of bad things.

The serpent doesn't say, don't hang with God. Go, murder, steal, kill, do violence, oppress, right?

That's not what happens in that conversation. It's much more subtle. All the serpent essentially says is this. Do you really need God?

Do you really need God? Do you really need God to rule your life? Do you really need God to be your king? Why don't you decide for yourselves what you believe is good?

[14 : 53] What you believe is evil? Why don't you make those determinations? I'm sure God would appreciate it if you could make those kinds of decisions on your own.

He's got better things to think about. So the serpent doesn't say, go do bad things. The serpent says, go do good things your way. Go do lots of good in the world.

God will appreciate it if you go do good in the world. And he doesn't have to oversee it. Go do good in the world. Do it your way. On your terms. You know, it's noteworthy that the woman looks at, she doesn't look at the tree and say, now I'm going to stick it to God.

In your face, God. She looks at the tree and sees that it's good for food. This is a good thing. I'm going to do good. God will appreciate that.

And so we need to understand that human beings are alienated from God for different, very complex reasons. And there are certainly people out there that do bad things by most people's standards. They hurt others or steal or murder, certainly.

[15 : 58] But most people are alienated from God, not for those reasons. Most people, if you look at their lives, live good lives. There are lots of people out there, especially in places like Washington, D.C., who live good lives by the world's standards.

You know, they want to love their neighbors. They want to be kind. They want to do good in the world. They want to relieve suffering. They want to lift people out of poverty and oppression.

They want to do that. That's why a lot of people come here. So there are a lot of people who do good, but they simply do good on their own terms. And this essentially describes, I think, what has

happened in the West over the last few centuries.

You know the very well-known passage from the Old Testament, Micah 6, verse 8. He has told you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?

Go to a Christian conference and you're very likely to find people with that tattooed on them somewhere. It's a favorite verse, maybe in Hebrew. It's a very favorite verse of many people.

[17 : 14] Here's what it is to do good, right? Do justice, love kindness or mercy, and walk humbly with your God. Wim Wright-Kirk, who's the president of Labrie, was reflecting on this passage at one point.

And he says, the basic problem with people in the West is not that we do not know what justice is. We do know. And we know what mercy is.

But we believe that we can achieve them without walking humbly with our God. Pope Benedict once said, in the West, we try to have the fruit of Christianity.

Like justice, equality, universal human rights. But without the roots. And he said that when we do this, he predicted, this is ten years ago, society will inevitably collapse into a loose collection of shrill special interest groups.

It's prophetic. Right? So now we live in a society where everyone has their own concept of justice and mercy. Everybody loves justice. Everybody wants to do mercy.

[18 : 21] But what does that mean? And everyone believes that he or she is on the right side of history. And everyone wants to claim the moral high ground. And so much of our society is like a gigantic battle of King of the Hill.

Where everybody wants to claim the moral high ground. And everyone is happy to signal their virtue. Here's how I'm doing good in the world. But almost no one really believes they need a savior. No one really believes they need a king. It's as though at some point in history we said to God, thanks, we'll take it from here. We'll do a better job without you.

And so many people think, and I think a lot of Christians think, as long as we're doing good in the world, what does it matter? The end justifies the means. Who cares how we get there?

If we're doing good in the world, isn't that all God cares about? And so we're happy to see Jesus as a spiritual sidekick. We are happy to see Jesus as a social justice warrior.

[19 : 20] Or as a source of personal inspiration. But not as our savior. And certainly not as our king. And what we need to understand is, in the words of Pope Benedict, when we desire the fruit of Christianity without the roots of Christianity, that's evidence that we are actually rooting our lives in the lie of the serpent.

That we are children, offspring of vipers. Because we have come to believe that we don't actually need God to be our king. And that we can do a better job of doing good in the world without him. And so John's message is this. The king has come. So now is the time to prepare your heart. Prepare the way of the Lord. So this leads us to the final question.

How do we get prepared to receive Jesus? Not just the bad people, so to speak. But the good people. How do good people prepare to receive Jesus?

It's a lot more complicated. The word John uses is the word repent. And repentance means a total 180 degree turn away from your old way of life in order to embrace a new way of life.

[20 : 35] And repentance requires two things that we see in John's message. It requires putting down new roots. And it requires bearing a new kind of fruit.

So new roots and new fruit. So I'll just describe these briefly. New roots. We see this in verse 9. John says, even now the axe is laid to the root of the tree.

Right? And he's talking to people who are assuming that because of their heritage, because of their bloodline, that they are automatically in with God. And so John essentially says in this passage, listen, if God merely wanted children of Abraham, he could raise children of Abraham up from the stones.

It's not about that. Likewise, if all God cares about is justice. If all God cares about is justice, God could end poverty or racism tomorrow with a snap of his fingers.

He doesn't need us to do that. And that's hard to hear. But what we realize is that God doesn't just want those things to end. There's much more going on here.

[21 : 52] God is after a 180 degree heart level turn away from our own plans and agendas and toward God and his plan of salvation and renewal.

You know, there's that great story that N.T. Wright tells from Josephus in the first century when the Jews are planning a revolt against the Roman occupiers. And he hears of this. And Josephus is in good with the Roman aristocracy. And he knows that if these Jewish rebels actually rebel, they're going to get slaughtered. They're going to get wiped out. And so he goes to the leader of this rebellion. He meets with him in secret to try to convince him not to go on this suicide mission. And he uses this language. Repent and believe in me. In other words, you have a way that you think you want to do good in the world. But that road, as good as it seems, is going to lead to disaster. [22 : 48] Abandon your plan of goodness. Abandon your agenda and trust my way. And Josephus had a different plan, a different way that he believed would be more effective in dealing with the Romans.

And so he said, don't do this. It will lead to disaster. Repent and believe in me. And this is the message I think that we need to hear. Absolutely God wants to end justice. I mean, bring justice. Absolutely God wants to end oppression. Absolutely God wants to put the world right. But what God is ultimately after is our hearts. And the first thing the gospel does is to tear out the lie of the serpent by the roots.

It puts the axe to the root of the trees. It tells us God doesn't need our good works. God desires our hearts. He desires our love and devotion.

And here's the hard, complicated, but necessary truth. If the good works that we are doing in our lives lead to us needing God less, then they're not good.

[23 : 58] If the good works that we do make us more independent, more autonomous from God, then they are in a way evil. They may lead to good outcomes. But we've lost sight of the forest for the trees.

Right? We feel like we're winning a battle, but we're losing the war. Because our hearts are lost. In Jesus' earthly ministry, while he did many good things like heal people and cross racial and social barriers and demonstrate all of these evidences of what the new kingdom, the new creation would be like, there are many, many, many other good things that he didn't do.

There's a whole lot that Jesus could have done in terms of social good that he didn't do. Because the reason that Jesus came was to give his life for his people.

To save us from the lie of the serpent. The reason he came is to pour out his love into the world. To restore the kind of relationship that God desires to have with his people.

Somehow, for some reason, God's way of renewing the world is to partner with people who love him and work through them. That's how he desires to do it.

[25 : 12] So, the gospel puts down new roots in our hearts. You know, we realize that in order to win our love, God poured his love into our lives through Jesus.

And then we begin to realize that because that's what happened on the cross, there's nothing that we can do to make God love us any more or any less. And that because of the cross, just as God said to Jesus after his baptism, so he says to us, This is my beloved child.

And you, I'm well pleased. And when you hear those words, not just applied to Jesus, but applied to you, when you hear God's voice saying to you, You are my beloved child. And you, I'm well pleased.

And you, I delight. That begins to put down new roots in your heart. New roots. And then, John says, Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

Now that you have this root that came through your repentance, now bear fruit out of that new source. Out of that place of love and assurance, new fruit begins to grow.

[26 : 18] And here's the key. It may look exactly like the old fruit. Right? It may look indistinguishable from the old fruit. You want to do justice. You want to love mercy.

You want to liberate the oppressed. You want to see society become more adjust. Right? You want soldiers to be content with their wages. You want tax collectors not to abuse and extort money from their own people.

Right? You want all of these things to be true. But the motivation is completely different. And that actually matters. The motivation is different.

The roots are different. Because all of those good works are flowing out of a love and dependence on God. And when your motivation is different, it changes everything.

Because it means you can do good works in the world, but there's no desire or temptation to signal your virtue. Because the gospel is tremendously humbling.

[27 : 15] It's tremendously humbling. And so we can do good works, but from a place of humility. And it means that when we do good works, we don't look down or judge people who don't seem as concerned as we are about this or that said issue.

Because, again, we're coming from a place of humility. And we don't go and do good in order to glorify ourselves. We don't go and post when we go and serve at some place of need. We don't post a dozen pictures of it online for everybody to see. We don't feel that need. Because the only glory that we desire is to see God glorified. Right?

So this is John's message, I think, that we in a place like D.C. need to hear. The true king of this world has come, and his name is Jesus Christ.

And one day he will come again. And all of creation will unfurl itself like a red carpet to receive him. So the question that we need to wrestle with is, am I prepared to receive him?

[28 : 16] To use the imagery from the passage, will the valley of my longing for the true king rise up to meet him? And will the mountain of my pride bow down before him?

Let's pray. Lord, these are, as we said at the beginning, spiritual realities. We have a spiritual event of the coming of Christ. And that requires of us a spiritual response.

So I pray that we would respond to Jesus not just with our intellect, not just with our heart, but that there would be a spiritual shift in us. A desire to be free from the lie of the serpent.

A desire to root our lives in your love and your assurance and your adoption of us as your children. And that that would be the seedbed and the source. That would be the headwaters of all of the love and the justice and the mercy that flows out of us into this world, Lord.

So that ultimately, when all is said and done, your name will be glorified. And it's in the name of your son, Jesus, that we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[29 : 23] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.