

Preparing the Way of the Lord with "3Rs" and a "P" Luke 3:1-18

Adapted from: "Prepare for Christ with the 3 Rs" by Daniel Habben @ SermonCentral.Com

If you want to be prepared for life after school it's important to build a solid foundation in the 3Rs: reading, writing, and arithmetic. So important are these basic skills that parents wanting to help their children along educationally enroll them in learning centers such as Oxford and Sylvan. But, while building a solid foundation in the 3Rs can prepare you for life after school there is another set of 3Rs (and a P) that prepares us for something much more important, namely for Christ's coming. **This Advent Sunday, in this season of preparation John the Baptiser would help us to prepare for Christ's coming with these three Rs and a P: Repentance, Rearranging, Rejoicing, and Proclaiming.**

There is no better person to help prepare us for Christ than John the Baptizer, after all he was sent for that very purpose. Quoting Isaiah to the crowds, John identified himself as

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" ... with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. (Luke 3: 4, 18)

So, the first thing that John encourages us to do in preparing for Christ's coming is to REPENT.

John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins

Luke 3:3

Now the word "repent" has fallen greatly out of favor in our modern society. We immediately think of Elmer Gantry type preachers: hypocrites who prey on the religious fears of other people for their own profit, much like those Pharisees that John

confronted. Besides, we just don't think that we are such bad people that we need to repent of anything.

But repentance is an important word for us to understand, because it is the foundation of our salvation. Repentance literally means "to think differently," "to change your mind." In the case of today's Scripture, this is in regard to what you consider in your life as meriting God's favor. John declares here that in preparation for the coming of Christ we need to repent regarding the life we are living, we need to change our mind about sin.

Repentance, remorse for the life they were living, was something lacking in many of the religious leaders of John's day. That is why, when they came out to be baptized, John challenged them, "*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?*" (Luke 3:7). John knew that the Pharisees and Sadducees weren't coming because they were sorry for their sins. He knew instead that they wanted to be baptized because that was the thing to do if you were a religious person; keeping up such religious appearances was very important for these leaders.

No, these leaders didn't think that they needed A "*baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,*" because after all they were Abraham's children! Didn't that mean they had a free ticket to heaven? Weren't they God's chosen people? **And might we also run the risk of coming to worship with that same attitude?** Some people do come to church not because they want to hear God's Word, or to change their life, but out of a sense of habit, tradition, obligation to family, or like the Pharisees "just for keeping up appearances." And in the process these people may even trick themselves into believing that heaven is theirs by virtue of such practices. If you are one of those people, John has some strong words for you to hear, "**You brood of vipers!**" (Luke 3:7) Deceitful, just like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, that is what we are if we only outwardly live the life of a believer without a genuine inner repentance.

But what does it exactly mean to repent? It doesn't mean to be sad that others are offended by our sins, or sad that we got caught. That's regret, not repentance. True repentance means to change our mind about sin. It means that we no longer view sin as something that is fun and exciting, or something which can't be helped and isn't that harmful any way. It means that we see sin for what it is—something that damages our relationship with God and with others. Sin is something that God hates so much that he

once destroyed everyone in the world, except for eight people, with a flood. And sin will move God to destroy the world again—this next time with fire.

“His winnowing fork is in His hand,
to clear his threshing floor and to
gather the wheat into his granary;
but the chaff he will burn with
unquenchable fire.” Luke 3:17

Jesus’ first advent was to gather the wheat; his second will be to burn the chaff. How then should we view our sin? May I suggest --with serious sadness? Therefore when we all join in the prayer of confession at the beginning of the service we should not just parrot the words printed out for us in the bulletin, but make that confession a sincere confession. As you confess your sins think of how you have brought grief to your heavenly Father by your actions, words, and thoughts. Think, remember, and repent.

Repentance of our sins however, is only the first step in preparing for Christ, the next step is rearranging our lives. **“Produce fruits!”** That’s what John told those who were coming out to be baptized by him. Don’t just say you are sorry but show it in the way that you rearrange your life so that you don’t fall into that sin again.

How exactly should we rearrange our lives? That depends. When the **tax collectors** asked John that question he told them that they should no longer take more money than they had been appointed to take. When the **soldiers** wanted to know how to rearrange their lives John told them not to use their positions to terrorize people or to extort money from them. He encouraged them instead to be content with their pay.

What kind of advice would John give to you regarding the fruit of your repentance?

Well, if you are in sales he may tell you not to withhold the truth from your customers concerning a product they are planning on buying. If you get paid by the hour, John would have encouraged you not to punch-in and then sit around and talk for 20 or 30 minutes before working. If you are a student he would have told you not to cheat, and to respect your teachers and classmates. John would have told a couple living together outside of marriage not just to acknowledge that such a life is sinful but to stop living in

that sin by moving apart, and not arguing that it's impractical to do so, or that it's OK to live together as long as you are planning on getting married. Saying that we are sorry for our sin but refusing to rearrange our life to avoid that sin shows that we really haven't repented. Such a person has no part in Christ, as the writer to the Hebrews very bluntly wrote:

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Hebrews 10:26, 27

John the Baptizer said it this way in our text.

Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Luke 3:9

Thinking about repentance and rearranging is especially important for us today as we prepare to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Part of our preparation, Paul reminds us, is we not only acknowledge that we are sinners but also plan on rearranging our sinful lives. If we come to receive the sacrament without first examining our lives and as needed repenting and rearranging them, then we make a mockery of the forgiveness that is offered, and we receive the sacrament to our detriment, not our benefit. Therefore brothers and sisters, heed John's words and help prepare for the coming of the Lord through your own repentance and rearranging.

So far we've taken a look at two of the 3 Rs that prepare us for Christ but if we stop now with repentance and rearranging we would be no better off than all the other religions of this world. Every religion tries to get people to feel sorry for the wrong they have done, and encourages them to make the world a better place in which to live.

But repentance and rearranging cannot bring us salvation. We can try and try to get rid of sin but we will always fall back into it. Therefore what hope is there for us who want to stand before a God who demands perfection? Even John the Baptizer, whom Jesus called the greatest man ever born (Matt. 11:11), knew that he was unworthy to stand in God's presence. When the people began to wonder whether or not John was the promised Messiah, he told them that he wasn't even worthy to untie the Messiah's sandals (Luke 3:16).

While none of us deserves to stand in God's presence, Jesus, the Messiah came to save us from our sins making it possible for us to stand before him. You see, when John encouraged us to produce fruits worthy of repentance he was not telling us to produce fruits **worthy of forgiveness**. Nothing we do can ever earn God's forgiveness. God does not forgive because we are sorry for our sins; he forgives because Jesus died for us. Seeking to rearrange our life so that we don't fall back into sin then is simply a joyful, God-made response to that forgiveness.

So what's the third R that prepares us for Christ? Rejoicing!

We need to rejoice at the forgiveness that Jesus won for us. You see, while God does want us to feel sorry for the sins that we commit he doesn't want us to fall into despair over them. He wants us to know and believe that he has provided a solution. In fact if we think that God could never forgive us for what we have done then we are saying that Jesus really didn't do enough to win forgiveness for all people.

Jesus has not only won our forgiveness, he has promised to wash and seal us with the gift of the Holy Spirit. When John said that while he only baptized with water, but Jesus would baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire, **firstly John was referring to the day of Pentecost** when Jesus would visibly pour out the Holy Spirit on his apostles (Acts 2). But secondly he was referring to the Christ's 2nd Advent, his coming day of judgment, when he returns to clear the threshing floor and burn the chaff. Everyone of us needs the first baptism Or we will get the 2nd.

Lest we think that we have missed out on that gift, the Bible promises that this same Holy Spirit is poured out on all those who are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38, 39). Anyone who believes in Jesus can be certain that he has the gift of the Holy Spirit because we can only make such a confession if the Holy Spirit

has created the faith in our heart (1 Cor. 12:3). How then should we prepare the way of the Lord? With great rejoicing because Jesus is our Savior from sin.

And that brings up the final "P" for proclamation.

Christ did not come just to save us and leave us standing around with nothing—other than rejoicing—to do. He came as he said, "*to seek out and to save the lost*" (Luke 19:10). Then when he returned to his Father, he transferred that ministry to us.

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation

II Corinthians 5:18

So after our repenting, rearranging, and rejoicing then we prepare for the coming of the Lord by proclaiming his good news. That's how John did it.

with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. Luke 3:18

Everyone will, one day meet the Messiah, our Lord, either in this life as he "*gathers his grain into the barn,*" or at his second Advent when he comes to "*clear the threshing floor and burn the chaff.*"

Being a Follower of the Christ first begins as we **repent** and turn to Jesus. He then **baptizes us with His Spirit** who helps us to **rearrange our life**, while sending us out to share, **to proclaim** his message of love and forgiveness to the world.

A mother shared this story about a Christmas play that speaks to our life and responsibility in Christ. She said, "My young daughter, Jana, was so excited about her part in the Church play that I was sure she was one of the main characters. But she would never tell me what part she was playing. She wanted it to be a surprise.

The night of the performance all the parents and grandparents were in the audience. Then one by one the children took their places for the opening scene. I could see the shepherds fidgeting in one corner as Mary and Joseph stood solemnly behind the manger. In the back three young wise men waited impatiently. Jana was calmly sitting on a chair off-stage, to the side.

Then the teacher began: "A long time ago, Mary and Joseph had a baby and they named Him Jesus. And when Jesus was born, a bright star appeared over the stable."

With that cue, Jana got up from her chair, picked up a large tin-foil star, walked behind Mary and Joseph and held the star up high for everyone to see.

When the teacher told about the shepherds coming to see the baby, the three young shepherds came forward and Jana jiggled the star up and down excitedly to show them where to come. When the wise men responded to their cue, Jana took a few steps forward to meet them and to lead the way. Her face was alight as the real star might have been that night.

The play ended. We had refreshments. And on the way home Jana said, with great satisfaction "I had the main part!" "You did?" I questioned, wondering why she thought that. "Yes," she said, "'cause I showed everybody how to find Jesus!" (*pause*)

Cause I showed everybody..... how to find Jesus.

Friends, wouldn't that be a wonderful way to be remembered? That was the mission of John the Baptizer, and that is now our mission as well; to prepare the way for the coming Christ. Rather than fearing what is to come, we are to be faithfully preparing to see him. Instead of fearing the dark, we are to be light to the world, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.

We are in the season Advent, the season of preparation, the season of expectation. We are an Advent people. We are holding the Star. We too each have a main part--to show everybody how to find Jesus.

Let's now prepare our hearts to meet Jesus again, at his banqueting table.