

*The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

<sup>2</sup> *It is written in Isaiah the prophet:*

*“I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way”—*

<sup>3</sup> *“a voice of one calling in the desert,*

*‘Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.’ ”*

<sup>4</sup> *And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. <sup>6</sup> John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:1-8)*

### **How did God Prepare the Way?**

One summer when I was studying to be a pastor, I met a girl whom I can only describe as a free spirit. She wore tied-dyed clothes. She liked to party. She lived very much “in the moment.” When she discovered that I was studying to be a pastor, surprisingly, she thought that was “very cool.” But she had a lot of unusual ideas about what the ministry should be like. The thing that really bothered her about the way Lutheran pastors work was the idea that I actually prepare my sermons in advance. She thought I should just stand up here and speak extemporaneously. I think she thought that would be truer to myself and that it would be more free and moving. Well, what do you think? I think that it would be a whole lot more repetitive. I think it wouldn’t make a great deal of sense. I think that you’d get tired of it pretty quickly. But even worse, I know that I wouldn’t do a good job of teaching you what God’s word actually says. Being faithful to the Scriptures and preaching a message that convicts you of your sin and then comforts you with the gospel require study and preparation. If anything, I should spend more time preparing than I do.

Even God prepared for the ministry. Not personally, of course. God doesn’t need the kind of study and preparation that I need. But God did prepare the way for Christ to come. He didn’t just drop Jesus down in the middle of his people and say, “Go!” God carefully prepared the ground for the Savior’s work. What did he do?

#### **How did God prepare the way?**

**I. He prepared the messenger to go before him.**

**II. He prepared the message to introduce him.**

##### **I.**

The messenger is John the Baptist. Jesus said that **“among those born of women there is no one greater than John.”** That’s quite a tribute! John didn’t come by accident or coincidence or a strange twist of fate. God sent him. **God prepared the messenger to go before Jesus.**

God planned for John to come. Mark, writing under the Holy Spirit’s guidance, cites two different Old Testament prophecies that speak of John. In the book of Malachi, God said, **“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way.”** Later, in that same book, God said that Elijah would come – not a reincarnation, but a prophet like him. But the prophecy that Mark focuses on is this prophecy from Isaiah: **“A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”** This prophecy tells us what John would be like.

He would be a voice crying out. He would be a prophet – someone who preaches God’s message to God’s people. He would come in the desert. Certainly, that was literally fulfilled. John did preach in the desert. But if you look at the whole section from Isaiah 40, you realize that God was thinking of more than just the physical desert when he said these words. John didn’t literally build a highway. He didn’t literally cut down mountain tops and fill in valleys. All those things were figures for the rough and hardened nature of the human heart. John came to break our hearts and to create a road for Jesus to enter them. That road is the

gospel. The straight path that God calls us to prepare for Jesus is nothing other than a heart that trusts in him and that attends to his word.

God ordered the history of the world so that Jesus came in just the right time and place and under just the right circumstances to accomplish his mission. God planned for Israel to be the people he was born from. God planned for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, the city of David, from a virgin who was descended from King David. God planned for him to grow up not in Bethlehem but in Nazareth in Galilee. God planned for him to preach and teach and to turn Israel upside down with his message. God planned for him to do miracles. God planned for him to ride into Jerusalem as a king and then to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. God planned for him to suffer all that our sins deserve. God planned for him to die and then to rise again. God revealed all these things to Israel centuries before any of them happened. And a key part to the whole plan was the coming of John the Baptist, the messenger who went before Jesus to prepare his way.

God prepared John to be that messenger. Mark says, “**John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.**” That description matches almost exactly the description of the prophet Elijah in the book of 2 Kings. It describes a man who didn’t live in comfortable society. John the Baptist lived in the desert and he made do with what was there. I doubt that camel hair feels all that soft next to your skin. And eating locusts and wild honey is not like eating a fancy restaurant – although it did not seem gross to the people then. In fact, what his own people would’ve noticed about it was the fact that this was food that God allowed Israel to eat. The Old Testament specifically says that locusts and grasshoppers are food they can eat, while pork and shellfish and rabbits are food they can’t.

John’s diet shows his commitment to following the Lord. You may remember the story of his life. John was a miracle child. He was born to Zechariah and Elizabeth when they were too old to have children. John’s father was a priest. He recognized John as the promised messenger of the Messiah. Without a doubt, he raised John to know the Old Testament law codes and the promises that God had made about him. But he also probably died when John was young. The Holy Spirit took over his instruction. He prepared John to live the kind of lifestyle that the messenger of Christ must have.

God did all that for you. In his eternal love, he knew that you and I would need Jesus. Before he created the world, he understood that we would be lost unless he did something impossible to save us. So he planned and he prepared and he moved heaven and earth so that at just the right time and place, John would come to point to Jesus. Jesus has come for you and for me.

## II.

The important thing about John is not his biography. It’s not who he was. What’s important about John is the message God gave him to preach. **God prepared that message to introduce Jesus.** Mark tells us, “**And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**” John’s message was the gospel. God gives us the gospel in two ways. He gives us the spoken gospel and he gives us the visible gospel: the sacraments. John came baptizing. But notice that John also preached a baptism of repentance. Baptism is never mentioned outright in the Old Testament, although some Jewish rituals prepared God’s people for it. I’ve often wondered why almost everyone went out to be baptized. I guess I never paid enough attention to this statement. John preached this baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John told them what baptism does. It’s more than just a ceremonial washing. Baptism is the work of God. He reaches down from heaven through the word connected to the water and he takes our sin away.

John preached that message as a part of his larger message of repenting because the kingdom of heaven was near. John’s purpose was to wake God’s people up. It’s so easy to fall asleep spiritually. We get up every morning. We have to get to work. We have to get the kids to school. We have to make meals and do shopping and we always have a pile of things left undone. So it’s easy to neglect time to read the word together and on our own. It’s easy for us to take the word of God and our faith for granted. As time goes on, we can drift farther and farther from God and his word. We can begin to come to hear that word less and less. We wake up one day and it’s been a long time since we were in church. Of course, if our pastor asked us, we’d swear up and down that we would never forget our faith. We still believe in Jesus.

But the problem is faith in Christ is not natural. In fact, it goes against everything that we naturally want to believe. The natural thing for us to think is that God lets good people into heaven. So I need to be a decent person. I need to be honest and hardworking and faithful to my spouse. I need to keep my sins to minor things like driving too fast or the occasional foul language. If I do, I’ll be OK. That’s what all human beings

think by nature. But that's not what God says. God says that for us to get to heaven we have to be perfect. Perfect in all that we say and do and even perfect in all that we think and feel. And not just for one day. We have to be perfect for every minute of every day of our lives. One tiny screw-up makes us guilty forever. And we have to be perfect joyfully. We have to be glad to live like that.

Can we do that? Of course not. So God came up with a different solution: Jesus. Jesus died and he paid for our sin. He paid because our little slip-ups are serious sins that earn hell. He paid because we are evil in our nature. He died and paid and then he rose and God gave us eternal life. That's what the gospel is all about. And that's totally different from thinking we go to heaven because we're good. Since that gospel is unnatural, we need to keep hearing it. If we drift away hearing that gospel, we begin to lose it. We begin to slide into thinking God will take us to heaven if we're good. If God doesn't bring us back, we will wind up standing before him trying to get into heaven because we've been good. And we will go to hell.

God sent John the Baptist to preach and baptize to bring his drifting people back to faith in the promised Savior. You and I are no longer preparing for Jesus to come. He has come. He died. He rose. God has sent the gospel to us to teach us to trust in him and not in ourselves. That's what John's message was all about.

John was perhaps the most dramatic preacher ever to live. Jesus called him the greatest of those born among women. But what made him great was the way that he totally erased himself and focused all the attention on Jesus. He said, **"After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie."** Jesus is the Son of God. In just a couple weeks we will celebrate his coming in Bethlehem to take our place in life and death. God made himself one of us. That means that even the greatest man in history was unworthy of him because all of us are sinners. But the Son of God came down here for us. He will bring us to God.

John said, **"I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."** John didn't say these words to undercut the importance of baptism. In our baptism, we die and rise with Christ. God gives us all that Jesus did in baptism and so he gives faith to babies and strengthens the faith of those who are baptized later in life. All our lives, we can look back at that wonderful gift and know that we belong to God. John didn't want us to devalue our baptism. But he did want us to value Christ. Jesus baptized the Church with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Three years after John came, Jesus died and rose and ascended into heaven. Then he sent his Holy Spirit on his Church. Then he sent us out with the gospel. Until Christ returns, the Holy Spirit works in the gospel we proclaim when we preach and when we baptize.

John was the end of the Old Testament ministry. He was the last Old Testament prophet, even though we find him in the New Testament. John was the last prophet who spoke in poetry and figures and pointed forward to a Savior who was still coming. The New Testament ministry shows us Jesus in concrete form. We see how he fulfilled all those promises that God gave. Christ began something new on the day of Pentecost. But our ministry is the fulfillment of all the preparations God made for all those centuries of Old Testament ministry.

You and I are the beneficiaries of all that God did. God prepared the world so that you and I know Jesus. God prepared the ministry so that we trust in all that he has done. Jesus came for us. And through us, Jesus comes to the entire world. Advent is our celebration of how God made these incredible promises and then he kept them. Trust in him. Amen.