**Luke 3:1-14 December 5, 2021**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

 Our text for this morning comes from our Gospel lesson, Luke chapter 3 here re-reading these words. “As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

 Preparation is key in many different areas of life, but one is especially true. If you are a boxer or a professional fighter, after you accept the challenge to fight an opponent, there is usually a few months before the fight, where both fighters train and prepare to face the other fighter. Training to be a fighter includes a lot of different exercises and drills, if you’ve ever seen the movie “Rocky” or any other boxing movie you can probably think of scenes where the fighters are training. Rocky is running through the streets of Philadelphia to build up his stamina or even chasing a chicken in one scene so that he could learn speed. The interesting part of being a fighter though, is that a fighter prepares for how to properly get punched. A boxer does specific drills to prepare for getting punched in the face. It’s a harsh reality of being a boxer, but without that preparation, they wouldn’t be prepared for the fight at all. If they didn’t get the proper training to take a punch, then the first punch they took would be their last, like if any one of us were to step in the ring with a professional boxer. The only way for a boxer to take more than one punch was to be prepared to take them.

 Without preparation, the outcome is very easy to predict, not just in boxing but in various other aspects of life. If you aren’t prepared for a disaster it will be chaos, that’s why schools have fire drills to prepare the children so they know what to do. In life we must be prepared, in our physical lives, our careers and business lives, and also here in our spiritual lives. Advent is a time of preparation, where we prepare our hearts and minds for the arrival of the coming King. This is emphasized in various ways, from the emphasis of the light slowly growing through the lighting of the candles on the Advent Wreath, to the hymns we sing and the readings that are chosen for each Sunday in the lectionary of the Church Year. Even our liturgy reflects this season as today we omitted the Gloria in Excelsis as a reminder that this is a period of reflection and repentance. All of this is designed to prepare us for the joy of Christmas, and the ultimate reason for this joyous time of year, our need for a Savior, the prophecy of the one who would come and destroy death, and how Jesus Christ, born in Bethlehem was the fulfillment of that prophecy not just in his birth, but ultimately in his sacrificial death for the sins of the entire world.

 Last week our Advent lessons talked about Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and how the people rejoiced in the peace in heaven on account of God’s own Son. They laid down their cloaks and grabbed palm branches in a very well-known scene that we remember on Palm Sunday. This too is a preparation for the arrival of a King. It reminds us that the path and road that Christ was traveling on was being “prepared” as the road’s dirt and rocks were being covered to signify that this was an important person. There is a reason that the red carpet is unrolled when celebrities, royalty, and other important people enter into a building. It’s a sign of prestige or importance. A very important person doesn’t have to walk in the dirt, and neither did Jesus. He was being hailed as the King he was, just as the Magi emphasize this with the gifts they bring during our celebration of Epiphany.

 That’s what John’s whole purpose was, to prepare the way for Jesus Christ, to make the path of his ministry smooth in the hearts and minds of the people. While John didn’t come to lay down cloaks or place palm branches, instead he was preparing the way for Jesus with both great news of joy and cutting news of repentance. John was there as a direct fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, the one who would come to prepare the way of the Lord by making his paths straight. He also is a fulfillment here in Malachi, of the messenger who will prepare the way before the Lord. This was important because when Christ came it would be a momentous and spectacular change that the people had to be prepared for. This was a distinct shift in history, which is why Luke goes into so much trouble to show what particular moment in history this is taking place. While we read these names and titles and may even think that this is a meaningless gesture, even the setting of John’s ministry is a preparation for us in our daily lives. Where we can support the words of the Bible through history and point to these rulers in secular or non-religious texts and show that John was in fact a real person, just as Pontius Pilate and Annas and Caiphas were, not a fable or a teaching tool. And just as we are constantly being prepared through God’s Word, the people had to be prepared at that time. For Malachi asks. “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire.”

 Similar to the preparation that must be done for a boxer or fighter, to be prepared to fight, we too must be prepared. Here in God’s House, hearing His Word, receiving his sacraments, strengthened in our fellowship together. And while we enjoy the preparation of the Gospel, the reminder of all that God has done for us in the sending of His Son, the truth is we must be prepared also by the condemnation of the Law. Even with the beautiful decorations we gather on Wednesday nights to go through the Service of Prayer and Preaching, we read together the 10 commandments. We can’t ignore the fact that we sin and do wrong, and that we live in a cursed creation. The 10 commandments are something we need to be constantly reminded of, because we are constantly breaking them. We are constantly overlooking them. Rather than being prepared for the temptations of Satan and his demons that tempt us, we overlook the truth of the Law and instead believe a Law of our own making. A Law that says that we don’t need to be prepared as long as we continue to do what we feel is right. A Law that reflects the world we are in, and wants to pacify our consciences by saying that everyone has the right to act however they want all the time. A false Law, that doesn’t prepare us for the coming of Christ, and His truth, but only prepares us for a life that will be lived eternally separated from him.

 John the Baptist came with a true preparation because he spoke a message of repentance, but also came with the soothing truth of who Jesus was. That in Jesus Christ, when he came in glory to these crowds, and when they were properly prepared for his coming, then all flesh would see, the salvation of God. The indication that the crowds were prepared is found in their questions of what they should be doing then on account of their lives of sin. Once the Law pierces through our hearts and reveals us for the sinners that we truly are, the sinners that we were from the moment of our birth, that is the moment we are prepared to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When we are prepared to learn again the wonderful gifts that God has given us through the work of His Son, in being born of a virgin, suffering under Pontius Pilate, dying and rising again to destroy sin forever. It is in response to that amazing gift that we echo the question of the crowds, the tax collectors and soldiers here in our Gospel lesson. Or the crowds that Peter talks to on Pentecost, after they are convicted of their sin asking “What then must we do to be saved?”

 What we do after being prepared is the sign of our faith. Or as Paul writes in our Epistle lesson, how we are filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. The works that we do in response to the gift are what John is talking about saying “Bear fruits in keeping with repentance” and what he’s getting at in the specific answers he gives to the different groups of people who come looking for ways that they can be fully prepared. For the crowds it was a reminder to not hoard the earthly possessions of this world but instead to share freely with those around them. For the tax collectors it was a command to not steal money from those they were supposed to collect from. For the soldiers it was a command for them not to steal money by threats or false accusations but instead to be content with what they had. In the same way we come before God in our prayers this day and ask what can we do to glorify him in our lives of service, in the occupations that we have in our daily lives. We pray together as an assembly for the needs of the world but also for opportunities to show the faith in our hearts by producing fruits of good works for our neighbor and the glory of God rather than ourselves. And the specifics of those good works are unique to the different vocations we have in our lives. Which is why John specifically talks to different groups about different problems, but also is showing to the reader that the kingdom has been opened to not just God’s chosen people the Jews, but also to Gentiles.

 Because the tax collectors were outcasts in the eyes of religious leaders, as were the soldiers of that time, in a way John is talking to the “rocks” that he describes that God can create sons from. We too gathered together are the lifeless rocks that God has breathed his Holy Spirit into, for we are Gentiles yet we share in the promise of eternal life through the work of Jesus Christ. And out beyond these doors there are still those who live lives, dead to sin, who need to hear this lifesaving message and be prepared for the second coming of Jesus Christ. Who need to come into God’s presence here in His house, and Hear His Holy Word spoken to them, in both Law and Gospel, to convict them of their sin, and show them their need for a Savior.

 Our preparation continues in this Advent season, and at times it will bring frustration and disappointment. It will bring a harsh reality that we are not prepared and that we must come to God to confess our failures. John’s message still applies to us today, we must be made holy in God’s sight to receive Jesus Christ and his salvation as a gift. Our rocky and corrupted hearts must be smoothed, and we must be prepared in order for him to come. That is why this season is so important. Why the preparation must be taken seriously. Why we join together more often and have a special time of reflection. For the King is drawing near, the way is being prepared, and all flesh will see his salvation in His birth, his life, and his resurrection.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus.

Amen.