

“Make Ready a People”

Today I am beginning a three week series of advent sermons from the gospel of Luke to help prepare our hearts for Christmas.

The title of my message today is “Make Ready a People,” and I will be zeroing in on v. 17 of the text.

The gospel of Luke, more than any of the gospels, takes the greatest care in helping to make us ready for the coming of the Christ child.

Luke is a meticulous writer who is careful to give us all the details of the events that lead up to the birth of Christ.

In Luke’s introduction to the letter he tells Theophilus, the original recipient of this gospel, that it seemed good to him to “carefully investigate everything from the beginning” and to write an “orderly account so that (we) may know the certainty of the things that (we) have been taught” about Jesus.

So what Luke does first is he tells us the story of the birth of John the Baptist and how God announced that birth to his father Zechariah through the angel Gabriel. Then he tells us how that same angel spoke to Mary and told her that God would miraculously bring forth the Savior Jesus through a virgin birth. Then Luke tells us of the visit of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John, and how John the Baptist leapt in the womb of Elizabeth upon Mary’s arrival. Then we have Mary’s song of praise, the actual birth of John, Zechariah’s song of praise, and then, finally, the birth of Jesus.

Luke wants us to take in every detail because he knows that digesting the story in such a fashion will help to prepare us for the story of Christ’s birth.

Ironically, Luke is doing the same thing for us that God did in sending John the Baptist into the world. He is “making ready a people for the coming of the Lord.”

Our Need for Preparation

In thinking about the theme of preparation my mind went to a few things. I thought about weddings, food, and sports.

First, weddings.

One of the things that make weddings so special is all the preparation that goes into one. First, there is the proposal. These are usually well thought out. I proposed to Malia in a tree house in Montreat. I put a lot of thought into how I would pop the question. Then there was marriage counseling with our pastor. Then there was the planning of the ceremony and then the rehearsal of the ceremony. All of these things prepare us for the big day. They warm us up to the event.

Next is food.

My favorite place to eat out at is a good Japanese restaurant. The Japanese are smart. They know that food always tastes the best when people are prepared for it. They are the masters of this. The chef cooks every thing right before you. They twirl the knives. They toss the eggs up in the air and crack them with their spatulas. They build volcanoes with the onions. They are funny. Their skill goes far beyond their actual cooking. By the time your food comes off that grill your appetite is wet beyond belief.

Finally, there is sports.

Can you imagine watching the Super Bowl without all of the pregame festivities? Or the Rose Bowl without the Tournament of Roses parade? Or the World Series without the opening pitch ceremony? The “big game” would not be all that “big” without all the preparation. It’s what makes the game so fun.

We humans are built with a need for preparation.

John’s Ministry of Preparation

This is the purpose for which John the Baptist came. God sent John into the world to prepare the people for the coming of the Savior.

Through his ministry God did the same thing that the wedding planner, the Japanese cook, and the pregame festivities do. He prepares our hearts for Jesus.

We have learned a lot about this ministry these past few weeks from my series of sermons in John’s gospel.

In that book John the Baptist (not to be confused with John the apostle- the author of the gospel) is always telling people that he is not the Messiah. He has only come to point people to the Messiah.

Every time John sees Jesus he says, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” That was the ministry of John, to prepare people for Christ.

The other three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, give us a different glimpse of the ministry of John. They tell us about his preaching.

At the heart of John the Baptist’s preaching was his message of “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

John called on the people to repent, believe, and be baptized.

He did not make apologies for his preaching. He was very much a straight shooter and he preached that way because that was the same way that Jesus would preach. When Jesus preached

he announced the arrival of the Kingdom of God and he called on all people to repent- to turn from themselves (their sin and unbelief) and to trust in the Savior for the forgiveness of their sins.

The Way the World Prepares for Christmas

On the first Sunday of Advent, we are always reminded of all the preparing the world does to get us ready for the season of Christmas.

The world is always ahead of us in preparing for it, but in the wrong kind of way.

I like to go by Starbucks to get a cup of coffee and for several weeks I have noticed all of their “generic Christmas cheer” on their merchandise.

They advertise for us to make the world a better place and to bring about world peace. Not necessarily a bad thing, but there is nothing about the birth of the Savior. Then there is all of the merchandise itself. They, like most merchants, will turn their greatest profit in the next few weeks.

In Wal-Mart the store is already set up for the Christmas shoppers. Everything is strategically displayed.

The lights in downtown are up. Christmas trees have been for sale by the Signal Hill Mall since two weeks before Thanksgiving. The world starts so early that they actually get a jump on the church in celebrating Christmas.

There may some advantage to this.

By us starting this Sunday maybe it will cause us to look around and to give pause to what is happening.

Perhaps this first Sunday of Advent can cause us to slow down and not get too caught up in all the ways the world tries to domesticate the message of Christmas.

It is not my intent to trash all of these traditions.

The Lord is the Creator of the material world and he gives us holidays and festivals so as to enjoy the common things of life. God is not a sour-puss, but God is also not One who is desirous of seeing His people miss the true meaning of Christmas.

It is not chiefly about Christmas trees, lights, store displays, Santa Claus, or Starbucks coffee. Christmas is about the coming of God into the world, literally, in human flesh, through his eternal Son Jesus Christ.

That is why we call Jesus Emmanuel. It means God with us. That is an awesome message. God knows us because He has come to us; thus we can know God intimately, in a relationship, if we

will but follow the Son. God has not left us without revelation. We can really know God through Jesus.

God does not want us to miss this message at Christmas. This is why God gives us the ministry of John the Baptist over and over again, every year, in order to “make ready our hearts as a people prepared for the Lord.”

Conclusion

So I ask you this morning, are you prepared for Christmas?

By that I do not mean is your shopping list prepared. Or is there enough credit available on your credit cards to buy all of things you think people will need. Or are your travel plans taken care of, the Christmas cards sent, and the RSVP's reserved.

Not necessarily bad things, but definitely not the center of Christmas.

The center of Christmas is Jesus Christ. Have you prepared room for him in your heart? Not all the other stuff, but Jesus.

God called John the Baptist into the world for the purpose of preparing the world for the coming of the Savior.

The word for us this morning is this- wake up from your slumber and get ready for the coming of Christ.

Not just his first coming into the world as a babe in a manger, but also his second coming as the roaring Lion of Judah who will forever crush the power of sin, death, and evil and who will usher in the new heavens and new earth; thus consummating God's final redemption of the world.

- Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. (Rev. 21:1-6)

Come Lord Jesus, come. We are ready and waiting.

Amen.