

Sermon Text: Luke 3:1-6 Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth; ⁶ And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" (NKJV)

Sermon Theme: Preparations of the Heart for a Joyous Christmas Celebration

- 1. Includes having an correct understanding of the nature of Jesus' reign as king**
- 2. And mankind's need for Him as Savior**

In the name of the Christchild, whose birthday we are looking forward to celebrate, dear fellow redeemed;

During the Christmas season the spirit of heart experienced by Christians is peace, joy, and hope. As preparations are made for the joyous celebration of Christmas, it is quite common to have a list of traditional things to do. Such a list may include putting up Christmas decorations, buying or making gifts, sending out Christmas cards or letters, and making special foods. As celebrants go about these various preparations for Christmas, do any of these activities contribute to having a joyous celebration? With the press of the shopping crowds, the financial strain in buying presents, and the time limitations to get everything done, the various preparations for Christmas have been known to create anxiety and stress for many instead of promoting joy. And quite frankly, as Christians we realize that oftentimes the focus and the reason for a joyful celebration is misplaced. Many have been known to focus on the externals or the trappings of Christmas as being the source of joy, rather than the true meaning of Christmas, namely, the celebration of our Savior's birth. While the customary preparations can be trying at times, yet if we go about them in a balanced and spiritually thoughtful way, they can serve to contribute to having a joyful celebration of Jesus' birth.

The nature of John the Baptist's ministry, spoken of in our text, can more than any Christmas preparation result in blessing us with joy of heart not only at Christmas time and during the course of this life, but also in the eternal life to come.

As many of you know, John was the great forerunner of Jesus who prepared the way for His coming to the Jews. His preparations were pictured by the prophet Isaiah in these words, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough ways smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." Through this

symbolic picture Holy Scripture was speaking of a spiritual preparation of the heart so that Jesus could make His way there to live and reign with His grace, mercy, and love. In order that Jesus might enter into the hearts of sinners to bless them with peace, joy, and hope, obstacles that stood in the way needed to be removed and hearts needed to be transformed so that individuals could behold Jesus in faith as their Savior King and rejoice in the joy of their salvation.

These obstacles include misconceptions about Jesus and the kind of kingdom He came to establish, and also misconceptions about the people's own spiritual state and need for a Savior.

Looking at the prevailing political and religious conditions in Palestine we can readily understand why there was a need for John the Baptist to prepare the Jews for Jesus. Our text draws our attention to this as it first of all lists the government officials who exercised authority over the Jews. We learn of the political scene in verse 1 where it says, "Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene."

At this time in history the Jews were under the rule of the Roman Empire. Tiberius, who had succeeded Caesar Augustus as the Roman emperor, was bitterly hostile toward the Jews. And the Roman officials in Palestine made life very difficult for them. Under Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, the people suffered great injustices, persecutions, and cruelties. Another matter that was a source of much aggravation to the Jews was the heavy taxation by the Roman government.

Truly the glory had departed from Israel and the scepter or rule had departed from Judah as Old Testament Scripture had foretold. This was to be the prevailing condition under which the Messiah was to come and save His people Israel.

Many of the Jews, who longed for deliverance from Roman rule, misinterpreted the Messianic prophecies to read that the Messiah would come to liberate them from their political oppressors, establish civil peace, and bring material prosperity. Is this the kind of peace, joy, and hope Jesus was to bring? The kind of preparations John the Baptist made certainly didn't suggest that. He didn't recruit young Jewish men for a military army or collect money for weapons and supplies or stir up the people to revolt against the Roman government. Instead, John came preparing a spiritual pathway into their hearts for the Messiah to deliver them from the cruel and oppressive rule of sin and the devil, and bless them with spiritual peace, joy, and hope.

Many in our day are unprepared for the entrance of Jesus into their hearts to rule and govern their thinking, beliefs and manner of living. And why is that? It is because their hopes and aspirations are earth-bound and not heaven-bound. Most people are more concerned about establishing temporal peace and financial security than they are about obtaining the spiritual peace between God and man, or the spiritual riches that are to be found in Jesus Christ. This comes across when the Christmas angels' song is misunderstood to say that there will be temporal peace on earth because of men of goodwill, rather than there will be a spiritual peace on earth because of God's goodwill

toward men in Christ Jesus. The earthly minded are bent on trying to create a heaven here on earth that conforms to their wants, needs, and desires, while giving no thought to the new earth and new heavens above that God will usher in at the end of time. And so for many at Christmas time they try to find joy in the externals of Christmas like the decorations, gifts, and foods, rather than in the birth of the Savior.

Certainly a peaceful coexistence between peoples here on earth is a desirable thing. But as long as individuals are separated from God by reason of their sin and unbelief, there will be no true lasting temporal peace between people in society. Neither will they have the certain hope of entering a heavenly life in the world to come. Thank God that Jesus' mission in life was to deliver us from the reign of sin and unbelief, and make us citizens of heaven where there will be no more sin and strife.

When we consider what it is that gives us reason for peace, joy, and hope at Christmas time, may the Lord help us to keep in mind that the highest form of peace, joy, and hope come from the spiritual meaning that lies behind the many externals of the Christmas observance. While the decorations, presents, and gifts can be a source of delight in themselves. Yet, when the various observations remind us of our Savior King who came to rule in our hearts with His grace, mercy, and love, and to make us a part of His eternal kingdom of glory in heaven, we experience the highest form of peace, joy, and hope that lasts throughout our lives.

The other reason for the need of John the Baptist to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus can be found in the religious conditions among the Jews. Our text directs our attention to this as it reports that Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests at that time. Report of this immediately raises a red flag, telling us that all was not right in their religious community. When this office was first established by God there was to be only one high priest at a time and he was to hold that position for life. Another matter that wasn't quite right is that both Annas and Caiaphas had been appointed by the Roman government, instead of by the religious authority of God. And while Annas had been deposed at one point by the government and succeeded by Caiaphas, the Jews looked to both Annas and Caiaphas as their high priests. All this was a religious mess.

When Jesus arrived on the scene, the office of the high priest had been elevated to the exalted position of religious head over all Judaism, overseeing the spiritual welfare of the people. Finding both Annas and Caiaphas as high priests gives us an indication of the kind of spiritual leadership the Jews were receiving in that day. Both Annas and Caiaphas were members of the Sadducees, one of the religious sects of the Jews. Some of the false beliefs of the Sadducees were the denial of a bodily resurrection from the dead, a final day of judgment, and a life after death. They also believed that in this life each person is the master of his own fate and that God has very little affect on what happens to him. With these kinds of misbeliefs these religious leaders and those who followed them wouldn't see any need for a Savior to deliver them from the fate of eternal death and condemnation.

Another religious sect that had a decided affect on the religious life of the Jews was the Pharisees. While this faction believed in a bodily resurrection, a day of judgment,

and a life after death, yet they misled people to believe a person is capable of meriting the favor of God and gain entrance into heaven through his good works. Those who were under the sway of this faulty belief also would see no need for a Savior. Besides their religion of work-righteousness, the Pharisees had formulated man-made religious laws which made allowances for them to get around the commandments of God and indulge their sinful desires.

This whole picture of religious and spiritual bankruptcy bears a striking resemblance to the impoverished spiritual leadership and teachings that have wormed their way into different branches of Christendom in our day. For in many religious circles it is believed that Jesus only came into this world to provide us with moral and social leadership and not to save us from our sin and deserved punishment. And the commandments of God are compromised with churches following the ever changing standards of society rather than the unchangeable will of God.

Anyone living in such spiritual and moral delusion is missing out on the true joy of Christmas, for they do not celebrate the birth of their Savior. The sin that rules their lives plagues their conscience with the feelings of guilt. And they do not possess the hope of a joy-filled deliverance in this life and for the life of the world to come.

The faulty kind of religious leadership that the Jews were subjected to was described by Jesus as the blind leading the blind. Because of this, it was very important for John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus so that the people would receive Him as the Savior of their soul whose teachings blessed them with God's pardon and eternal salvation.

In preparing the way for Jesus, John preached a message of the law and the gospel, of sin and grace, and of repentance over sin and faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. In this way the hearts of many were prepared to look to and receive Jesus in faith as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

How thankful and how joyful we can be that the Word of God can make the necessary preparations for Jesus to enter our hearts and bless us with His saving grace. Since we all deal with sin in our hearts and lives that rob us of peace with God and joy of life, we find peace, joy, and hope in the gospel message of salvation through our Savior Jesus Christ.

As we go about the preparations for the Christmas holiday, may the Word of God serve to prepare our hearts so that as we celebrate our Savior's birth we are enabled to rejoice with a spirit of joy that surpasses all other kinds of joy. Amen