**Prepare the Way for the Lord**

Luke 3:1-20 April 27, 2014

Key Verse: 3:4b, “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.”

Just imagine that the president of US, Obama or our Prime Minister Stephen Harper wants to visit you personally, what are you going to do? Aren’t you going to prepare something to meet him in a proper and respectful manner or you are not going to care about that? I believe that you will be willing to prepare something in a way that you can meet him in a most respectful way. Today’ passage is about, “Prepare the way for the Lord!” Here the Lord means Christ, the King of kings and the Lord of lords who is far greater than any human leaders beyond our imagination. He wants to come to you and live with you as your personal God and loving, perfect, everlasting Father. This is the greatest good news that human history has ever had. To let people know this, God himself prepared a servant; John the Baptist to help them to prepare the way for the Lord. Then let’s learn how we can prepare the way for the Lord through today’s passage.

**I. Prepare the way for the Lord through repentance (1-6)**

Verse 1and 2 tell about the times when John received the word of God as the forerunner of Christ. Look at these verses. “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar - when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene – during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert.” Tiberius Caesar was the second Caesar after Augustus (A.D. 14-37) and has been described as “the gloomiest of men” who treated many people harshly (by Pliney the Elder). Pontius Pilate has been well known as the Roman governor of Judea to most Christians because he failed to uphold justice for innocent Jesus. Herod (Antipas) was a son of Herod the Great who had killed so many little babies when Jesus had been born and he also carried out many evil deeds including taking his brother’s wife and killed John the Baptist later. When people those days were ruled by such cruel and evil rulers, it must have been very difficult to live righteous life before God. And what made their life worse was their spiritual leaders’ bad influence. The high priest of Israel, Annas and Caiphas were nothing but religious politicians who loved neither God nor people but only money and power. The world was dark and full of evil. The world seemed to have no hope when people looked at only those evil people. Yet God had been working steadily in his time agenda. He was about to send Christ to begin his messianic work in this dark world. What God did first was to prepare a servant, John the Baptist as Christ’ forerunner through godly parents Zechariah and Elisabeth.

John was born 6 month earlier than Jesus and when he was born, the angel prophesied that he would go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to make ready people prepared for the Lord (1:17). As the angel prophesized, John was filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth and as he grew, he lived in solitary desert like Elijah spending many days and nights meditating on the word of God; the Old Testaments and in prayer. Then “the word of God came to him” (2).

Here we learn that while the world is going to its own way, God also always does his work through man by giving his word to him personally. To whom does God give his word? To those who long to listen to his words rather than people’s words. This is why we need to have personal quiet time in a place where you are not distracted by anything or anyone but can concentrate on listening to God’s word through the Bible.

Then what content was the word of God came to John? Let’s look at verses 3-6 and read them together. “He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: ‘A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God’s salvation.’” The content of God’s word came to John was about baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins based on the word of Isaiah 40:3-5. Here, first, let’s think about the meaning of repentance more clearly.

Repentance is “metanoia” in original Greek word which means “a change of mind, heart, and action” including the change of your whole inner nature such as intellectual, emotional, and moral attitude and desire and ultimately the goal, purpose, and direction of your life. Biblically, it means “turning from your sins and turning to God. It doesn’t mean merely feeling sorry or regret about sin without changing your actual mind and action. One of the best examples is Saint Augustine’s repentance. After his repentance, one day, in a street he met the prostitute with whom he had played and then she called his name saying, “Is it you, Augustine?” maybe because she wanted to play with him as before but Augustine answered, “It is not me.” And then he ran away from her. This is real repentance; no turning back to his old life style.

When we repent, as a sign of our true repentance, we are baptized as a public declaration of our personal decision to repent and live a new life in the union with Christ. And when we repent, God’s promise for us is that we receive God’s forgiveness of sins. For this forgiveness of sins, Christ came and he makes us new creation as his sons and daughter. This is what Christ does for us. But before this work of Christ, people needed their preparation to accept Christ. For this, God sent John as the forerunner of Christ with particular word of God based on Isaiah 40:3-5.

According to the words that John received from God, to prepare the way for the Lord, what we must do is to make straight paths for him and there are 4 things that become obstacles to making straight path for the Lord; they are valley, mountain and hill, the crooked roads, and the rough ways. These are all explaining the states of our hearts to be repented. Some people have a valley in their hearts. It is low self-esteem, or sense of inferiority, or depression. These valleys are formed from poor understanding of our true identity in God and of God’s unconditional love. According to Genesis 1 and 2, each one is God’s hand-made masterpiece created in his own image no matter how others look at me and each one is so precious and loved that God willingly sacrificed His Only Son for him. When we accept these words of God and change our mind from our own idea to God’s point of view, the valleys in our heart are filled in with the love of God and we can welcome Lord joyfully when he wants to come into our heart. Some people have mountains or hills in their hearts. They are pride and self-righteousness because of their something boastful; such as their appearance, or achievement, or position etc. Because of this pride, they think they are a little better than others not realizing their absolute need of the Lord. They don’t know their human righteousness and glory are all filthy rags before the eyes of holy God. Their mountains and hills need to be made low. Some people have a crooked heart. It is bitterness or victim mentality or incorrectly preoccupied idea. This crookedness makes them interpret everything incorrectly and mostly negatively. Those who have a crooked heart cannot accept Jesus as Lord and also hinder others in believing in Jesus. Lastly some people have roughness in their heart. Roughness is the sign of immaturity of our personality; untrained and undisciplined heart like wild donkey. These are quick anger or hot temper or quick judgmental attitude. Those who have such roughness in their heart need to learn God’s long-enduring gentle and patient love. When we remove such 4 obstacles in our heart road by accepting God’s word and his love, we are preparing the way for the Lord as an act of true repentance. Then all mankind will see God’s awesome salvation.

**II. Repent practically until producing fruit of repentance (7-14)**

When John preached the word of God with the spirit and power of Elijah, people of Israel were cut to the heart because they could sense God’s holy presence and authority in his message of repentance. So they came to John to be baptized by him as an act of their repentance. Toward the crowds, John did not compromise by saying their ears-pleasing words. Instead he sharply revealed their spiritual reality to urge them to really repent. Look at verses 7-9. “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our farther.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” No one likes to hear that he or she is the poisonous baby snake, offspring of the big snake; Satan. It might sound like a great insult or offense to them. But it was true to them. To God’s eyes, anyone who doesn’t repent is nothing but child of Satan who cannot avoid God’s righteous wrath. God wants us to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. It means repentance is not mere regret in words but actual change in our mind and action that can prove its genuineness through its real fruit. The one who easily falls in despair and frustration becomes very patient and long enduring with unshakable trust and hope. The self-centered becomes very other-centered. The legalistic becomes very gracious and warm-hearted. The pleasure- seeking Samaritan becomes spiritual mother who cares for thirsty souls with the living water that Jesus gives. When we have to produce such fruit of real repentance, what we should be careful is our complacency. Many people of Israel had spiritual complacency when John challenged them to repent. They thought, “We have Abraham as our father.” They thought that because they were merely descendants of Abraham, automatically they were God’s chosen people and God would show favour to them. So they were exempted from repentance.” It was their spiritual complacency and illusion. If we apply this complacency to us, it is equivalent to thinking that because I have believed for 30 years or because I am already a missionary; I have not much to repent like others. Or because I grew up in believing family, I am not too bad, etc. These are all complacent attitudes that make us spiritually blind. As for repentance, we must know the urgency of God’s eminent judgment. According to God’s word, “the ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” So, when we hear about repentance today, we must repent as a top priority today in our lives. At John’s warning, people knew that they could not make excuse in repentance. So they asked, “What should we do then?” John gave practical ways of repentance in his answer. The man with two tunics should share with him who has none and the one who has food should do the same. The tax collectors should not collect any more that they were required to. The soldiers should not extort money and accuse people falsely and be content with their pay. Likewise, repentance starts from your practical action of stopping your selfish life style and caring others more. And we can expand this practice more and more until we produce fruit of repentance as much as we can. And for producing fruit of repentance, there is more that we should know.

**III. We can produce the fruit of repentance through the help of the Holy Spirit (15-20)**

In verse 15, when people saw John’s powerful influence for people, they were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. At this, John clearly answered how different his authority and work are from Christ’s authority and work. Let’s read verses 16-17. “John answered them all, ‘I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” John’s authority is limited in baptizing people with water to help people to repent to prepare the way for the Lord and as we talked about water baptism, water baptism itself doesn’t have power to transform people’s inner being. But Jesus is the Christ of God who baptizes people with the Holy Spirit who has power to transform people’s inner being. When we repent, Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit makes us a new creation as his sons and daughters. In John 3:5 and 6, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth; no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.” And in John 15:5, Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remain in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” Bearing fruit is not the work of branches but the vine tree. Our job is remaining in Jesus by faith as an expression of genuine repentance. Then Jesus enables us to bear fruit of the Holy Spirit; in another word; the fruit of repentance.

Today we learn that in order to prepare the way for the Lord, we must repent until producing the fruit of repentance. And the meaning of repentance is a change of our mind and actual action based on the word of God. When we really decide to change our mind and action and accept Jesus as Lord, Jesus helps us to be transformed through the work of the Holy Spirit and produce the fruit of true repentance! May God bless each of us to know in what sense we should decide to repent practically to produce the fruit of repentance!