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Advent 2

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people... (just) as he said through his holy prophets of long ago. Amen.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Get ready! It's a message you hear everywhere this time of year. Of course, this message is not new. Some of the stores have been telling you to **get ready** for Christmas, since before Halloween when they set up their holiday aisles!

God's Word today, tells us to **Get ready**. This too is not a new message, but takes us back to the **fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar**, some 2,000 years ago, when John **preached** and baptized to **Prepare the way of the Lord**.

John's call, "**prepare**" is much more important than decorating the tree or shopping for presents. What he

teaches us is not only the best way to **prepare** for Christmas, but it's the only way to be **ready** to live with the Lord forever in heaven. So let us listen to John and with the Holy Spirit's help: **prepare**.

About thirty years after Jesus was born, God sent John the Baptizer to prepare the people for the start of Jesus' public ministry. So John went... **preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins**.

John's message was **repentance**. The Bible word here for **repentance** means a complete change, a transformation of heart and mind.

Naturally sinful human beings don't need just a little improvement, but a massive, total change to be ready **for the Lord**. A change as enormous as high **mountains made low**, and deep **valleys filled** in to make a **straight** and **smooth** road instead of rugged wilderness.

This means to live with the Lord, *we need to be* absolutely perfect, without even one **crooked** thought ever passing through our minds. God never said try hard, he said: **Be holy, because I am holy** (Lev 11:45).

To **Prepare the way of the Lord** we need to be holy perfect people for a holy, perfect God.

But that's not us! Instead, we have **mountains** of pride that rise up the moment someone points out our faults or confronts our sin, so that our first reaction is not to humbly admit our wrong but become defensive, looking to blame anyone except *my own fault, my own grievous fault*. The same pride that is quicker to ask what will I get rather than how can I give.

Other times, we get lost down in the deep **valleys** of despair—where all we can seem to see are our problems and troubles. And down in those **valleys** we fail to trust that up above the sun *is* shining—God is working for good and is present with his promises that never fail.

Every sin is a **crooked path** winding away from the **straight** path of obedience in love and worship of our good and perfect God.

So the only thing our sin-filled condition **prepares** us for is the judgment of the Lord—to be fall under the fiery ax of eternal ruin.

So what can we do to fix this? The point of John's message is we can't fix it. We cannot make our sinful **crookedness** into **straight** perfection any more than a child with a toy shovel could fill in the Grand Canyon!

John's message **repentance** means we don't need a self help book. We don't need a little positive thinking or try to do a bit more good than bad. What we need is a total change, a brand new holy condition! Therefore what we need is a Savior!

So if you don't see yourself by nature as an awful, rocky, barren wilderness, if you don't see your every sin and imperfection as a horrible weight around your neck dragging you down to hell, if you don't see yourself as sinking into doom with no way out unless someone else grabs you and pulls you to safety, then you're not listening to God. And you'll not be ready for what Christmas is really about, and you'll not be **prepared** to face death and God's judgment.

So believe this **word of God** that **came to John--** we all need the Savior who comes to pull out of this horrible mess of our own making. And then listen to

the **good news** John still preaches to you and me today:
Everyone will see the salvation of God.

Salvation is rescue, deliverance. **Salvation** is the rescuer pulling the helplessly drowning person to safety. **Salvation** is the firefighter carrying the person to safety who had been trapped in the burning building.

Salvation was the message John preached: The promised Savior is here to rescue the helpless sinner. Or to use his own words from John's gospel: **Look! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**

John preached we all need a Savior and that Jesus is the Savior we all need. **Christ** is the **salvation of God**—that is the **salvation** that comes *from* God alone. As God true who became man, Jesus came to this world with the sinless birth we lack.

He had the perfect humility we don't. Though He was tempted and suffered what we can't even imagine, still Christ's trust in His Father's love and plans was unbroken. Jesus' life was one perfect, **level, smooth, straight** way of obedience from beginning to end.

And the whole reason the Son of God came and lived that Holy life was so with it He could replace our sin and imperfection with His devotion. God counts Jesus' **righteous** holy life and makes it count for **Ours**.

We need a total and complete change from sinful to holy. In Jesus, we have it! He gives His **straight and smooth ways** in place of our **crooked and rough**.

And then Jesus let the judgment for our **mountains** of pride and **valleys** of despair all fall on Him instead of us. Christ took the fiery ax of punishment so it would not crush us!

The words of our lesson that date John's ministry also preview what Jesus chose to endure to save us: **...during the priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...** these were the religious leaders who judged the innocent Savior as guilty of death, a verdict Jesus' accepted so that He could declare us not guilty!

While Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea... the same **Pilate** who sentenced to Jesus to the cross,

where our Savior would take the punishment that brings us peace!

John's message was all about Jesus, the only one who saves us from our sins. That's why he came **preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.** John told people who were filthy with sin to be baptized, to be washed in the waters of the Jordan and their sins would be gone, **forgiven.**

Obviously the water of the Jordan River couldn't take sin away, only Jesus does that! And yet it says clearly John's baptism, just like baptism today, is **for the forgiveness of sins.** Baptism is not just plain water, but it is water along with the Word of God—the promise of the Savior who brings forgiveness. And that meant it was not the people or John at work in baptism, but God Himself cleansing and saving through His mighty Word.

And you and I have the same powerful, personal comfort from the Lord in our own baptisms! The saving work of Jesus' life, death and resurrection that He carried out for **everyone**, it was all applied to you,

to *just you* at your own baptism **of repentance for the forgiveness of sins!**

This is John's message: You cannot make yourself ready, but the Savior alone **prepares you**, as He washes your sin away and clothes you with His perfection.

If you do not see yourself as a holy perfect child of God, washed clean and forgiven from every sin by Jesus Christ, God's Son your Savior, then you're not listening to John, and you are not **prepared!**

So instead, believe **the word of God** that **came to John**. By the power of the Holy Spirit who creates faith through that **word**, trust Jesus has saved you, forgiven *you*, cleansed you and will see you through to the joys of eternal life.

This is what **repentance** is all about. **Repentance** is the Holy Spirit worked change of heart that believes what God says about our damning sin, but also trusts that Jesus has given us the total change we need through the forgiveness of every sin.

Soon our getting ready for Christmas will be done, but the need to **prepare the way of the Lord** will not be finished until we celebrate His birth in heaven's joys. So today and every day **Get ready** as you as you see your sin for what it is and then look to and lean upon Jesus Christ alone. In Him, you are **prepared**. Amen.

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Amen.