

# The Bethel Pulpit

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## BETHEL

LUTHERAN CHURCH

On the web at [www.bethel-madison.org](http://www.bethel-madison.org)

312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

Text: Luke 3:1-6

Theme: "Salvation is Coming: Prepare"

Let us pray. Stir up our hearts, Lord God, to prepare the way of your only Son. By his coming give to all the people of the world knowledge of your salvation; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Dear Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. At a Lutheran Youth Congress in Chicago I first heard Father John Powell tell this widely told story of a boy who kept focus on what he thought was the best part of Christmas. Tommy was hopeful that Christmas that he would get a new pony from his parents. When he woke up on Christmas morning, he raced down to the family Christmas tree and was surprised to find nothing under the tree except for a few small presents. Unfazed, he looked outside, and on their farm, he saw a large pile of manure on top of a snowbank on the sidewalk. When his parents got up and looked outside, they were surprised to discover him enthusiastically shoveling the manure. The father went outside and heard Tommy exclaim, "With all this manure, there must be a pony somewhere!" This boy was so focused on what was important to him about Christmas that he would not give up.

How often we get caught up in all the outward trappings of what is happening in the world that we lose our focus on what is important. We get focused on the everyday events—who is president, who is governor, who is mayor, who is supervisor, who is bishop or pastor—the framework of the evangelist Luke's message for today (In Luke's time these were Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas). When we merely focus on these figures, we miss the real good news. We miss the one who is the Messiah, the Savior of the world. Gratefully, we have John the Pointer to proclaim to us a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John is like GPS signaling to us and preparing us for the one who will bring the salvation of God.

Today we are given this second of four celebrations in Advent to focus us on what is vitally important for us today. What is important is that we prepare for the salvation that is coming in Jesus the Messiah. We are to focus on the salvation coming in Christ. There are so many things that make demands on our lives during this time before Christmas. A quick list helps to

spark our minds (I hope I won't lose you to worry as I mention them): Christmas decorating, Christmas baking, gift buying, holiday parties, cleaning to get ready for the relatives, rehearsals for performances, the performances themselves, etc., etc., etc. All these things by themselves are very good things, wholesome activities. Unfortunately, though, these activities can act as distractions for not concentrating on the one thing that is most important. We lose sight of what we truly are preparing for—to celebrate the birthday of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

Luke points out the focus on the Savior and salvation constantly in His gospel. He uses the word "salvation" and its complement "savior" again and again in the first three chapters. In the first chapter he tells the parallel stories of the foretelling of the births of Jesus, the Messiah, and his cousin, John. He reflects upon the significance of their births and their lives. When the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, he says "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. He will be called Son of God. "When Gabriel leaves, Mary sings for joy, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in **God my Savior.**" Then after John has been muted for disbelieving his wife could bear a son after being barren for so long, he opens his mouth in prophecy: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a **mighty savior** for us that we would be **saved from our enemies** and from the hand of all who hate us. And you, child, John, will be called the prophet of the Most High; you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, **to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.**" When Jesus is born, the angels proclaim the good news to the shepherds, "To you is born this day in the city of David, a **Savior**, who is the Messiah, the Lord." When on the eighth day of his life Jesus is presented in the temple, the old man, Simeon, takes him in his arms and proclaims, "my eyes have seen **your salvation**, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." This Savior and salvation are for the whole world.

In chapter three Luke begins telling of John and Jesus when they are each around thirty years old. They are ready to carry out their work. John appears to "proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Luke points out that John's presence is a sign pointing us forward to what is happening is the fulfillment of

Scripture. John is the forerunner that the prophets Malachi and Isaiah spoke of hundreds of years before. As readers of the gospel of Luke, we know what this means. God is carrying out what has already begun—delivering us from any and all enemies.

Even though John is normally known for being the baptizer, John's focus today, in the first part of chapter 3 of Luke, is on proclamation. He preaches that all should go through "the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Then he announces why they should get ready through this ritual cleaning: "all flesh is about to see the salvation of God." This is good news for us today. It should not be lost on us. But the call to repentance does not sound like that great of news. For repentance is hard and painful work—John calls for us to c-c-c-change our lives, to confess our shortcomings, and beg God for mercy and forgiveness.

We can easily lose this focus on the One who is the Savior and on salvation today. We need to pay attention to John the Baptist as our pointer to that which is important right now in our lives. You know what a pointer is. It is a metaphor for a "finger pointing" toward someone or something. Labs and other retrievers are pointers to show hunters the way to some birds that they might harvest them. The lead reindeer in the song Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer is a pointer toward Santa Claus. In the foggy nighttime air, Rudolph's red nose shows them the way. A laser pointer in a presentation highlights information or a spotlight in a musical show us who is singing.

John the Baptist points to Jesus just like our GPS program points us to a destination. When we go the right way, we receive the next indication we are on the right track. When we don't, the GPS turns us around or in a new direction so that we might eventually get to our destination, in this case to our Savior and salvation. Like the stars in the sky that pointed the wise men to the birth of the Messiah so John's message points us to all that is important to the gift of salvation.

John the Proclaimer points us to how we can use our time to prepare for the Messiah's coming by setting our hearts and minds in right relationship to God. We are to repent and receive the forgiveness of our sins.

John's message is not totally new. Luke quotes Isaiah, and the other evangelists quote Malachi (the messenger). It is the ancient message of the prophets: "Repent!" Turn around 180 degrees from following someone or something other than God and turn toward following God. John adds to it the ritual action of performing a baptism. His listeners are to show their desire to turn around their lives by getting into the water of the river Jordan. Symbolically, they are to drown their sin and receive new life with God.

What is John saying to us today? Use this Advent to get focused. Follow the way of the Lord. Don't lose the forest in all the trees. We are to abandon following anyone else in order to choose to serve the Lord. Like Joshua serving as a prophet to the Israelites before they might go into the Promised Land, "Choose you this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house we will serve the Lord." John the Baptist is here to tell us today that all other paths to salvation will lead to a dead end. We are to look to Jesus for our salvation. AS John points out to a couple of his disciples in the gospel of John, chapter 1: "Behold, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

John's message of repentance is based on Isaiah's prophesy: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth,' Our hearts certainly can use some excavation. How often we have chosen to walk down a different path than that which the Lord would have us walk! How often have we done other than what God would have us do! How often has our reception of the Messiah been far from the ideal, lacking the passion and excitement necessary for the royal arrival of such a great dignitary.

John is the great excavator for us. He can dig holes where holes need to be dug. He can break down the rough spots and can smooth out the edges of our hearts so that we can fill our lives with more meaningful and fulfilling activities.

Last Monday I had three cavities filled. The work is not done yet. I think that John's work is like that of a dentist making ready for a newly repaired tooth. Believe me, the preparation is no fun, but unless it is done, the tooth will continue to decay, and my health will most likely suffer. [Jeff Thiemann, expands on this analogy in a sermon on this text:] "Often we avoid repentance, we avoid going straight to the Lord in the same way we avoid going to the dentist when our teeth hurt. People avoid going to the dentist to treat a cavity as if the dentist was going to torture them. Yes, the preparation prior to getting a new filling can be painful. I don't know anyone that enjoys that kind of preparation – the poking, the shots of Novocain and the drilling. Yet without that preparation, the dentist cannot replace the decay and the pain with a clean, solid filling. And so, people continue to experience the pain of a hurt tooth rather than go to the dentist to have it taken care of. All to avoid that painful preparation that comes before getting a new filling. But let's not ignore the preparation because of pain. All of us are living today with disorder in our lives, journeying on paths that are not straight and smooth. Our lives are full of twists and turns, ups and downs. In that disorder, we may be experiencing

pain in our lives. Some of that pain may have been there for a long time. That pain comes not from toothaches, but from heartaches.”

What are the heartaches in your life that can be healed? What are the holes that can be filled by the Master Dentist? “Let Go and Let God.” Turn those things over to God so that He can heal you. An example of that may be that if you are experiencing great heartache this December, attend the Blue Christmas service. It helps for us to gather together with others and support one another in our loss. We receive “shalom,” wholeness, healing, salvation.

John the Proclaimer points us forward today to the coming of a Savior bringing salvation. If we are properly prepared by John the Baptist and our Advent commemoration, how much more fully will we receive Jesus as Savior at Christmas? How much more clearly will we understand the gift of Jesus and the salvation He brings? How much more meaningful will be this Christmas.

There is a familiar Christmas carol written by Jerry Herman which says that “we need a little Christmas right this very minute.” I would like to rephrase this song from Mame. We need a little Advent right this very minute. We need a little Advent now.” We need it to prepare to receive salvation. We need it to prepare our hearts and minds—to reorder our very lives-- to receive Jesus as our Savior. Are you ready? Amen.