

*Filled with Expectation*

**A sermon preached by**  
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**Text:**  
Luke 3:1-18

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### Luke 3:1-18

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, <sup>2</sup>during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup>as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. <sup>5</sup>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; <sup>6</sup>and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

<sup>7</sup>John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>9</sup>Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” <sup>10</sup>And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” <sup>11</sup>In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” <sup>12</sup>Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” <sup>13</sup>He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” <sup>14</sup>Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

<sup>15</sup>As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup>John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary;

but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” <sup>18</sup>So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.



I know a guy who needed an oil change for his car and decided on a crisp, Fall Saturday morning that he would change it himself to save some money. He isn't much of a handyman, but he tries really hard and besides, he considers himself something of an adventurous spirit and this was one adventure that he hadn't yet experienced.

He prepared carefully for this new adventure. He drove to the automotive store and bought a pair of ramps to drive the car onto so he could get underneath – they were on special sale that weekend, \$27.95. He bought a special mechanics creeper so he could lay on it and wheel himself under the car to reach the oil pan -- \$15.95. He needed a special flat oil pan to collect the used oil as it drained out -- \$3.50. He found a funnel that he would use to pour in the new oil -- \$2.95. He bought an oil filter wrench for \$3.25 and, of course, the oil filter itself for \$5.49. So far, then, he had invested \$59.09. An oil change at Jiffy Lube would have cost him about \$20 but he felt like he was learning something so he didn't mind the added expense.

He drove the car up onto the brand new special ramps. He rolled himself under on his new mechanics creeper. He took out the oil plug and drained the dirty oil into the oil collection pan and replaced the plug. So far, all was going well. He unscrewed the old oil filter with his new wrench and replaced it with the new filter.

He then realized that despite all his preparations, he had forgotten the most important item – the oil. “Oh well,” he thought to himself, “No problem. Pep Boys is just a few miles away. No big deal.” So he backed the car down off the ramps and headed down the road. Cost of motor overhaul after driving a few yards

without any oil in the engine -- \$895. Total cost of the day's oil change adventure -- \$954.09.

Lessons learned that crisp, fall morning – priceless.

Isn't it amazing that we can prepare for something so diligently yet we still mess it up. My dad had a favorite saying – “When all else fails ... read the directions.” Often we jump into something without really knowing what it's all about or without preparing adequately for it.

No doubt this Christmas morning will find some of us sitting on the floor trying to put some thing-a-ma-jig together where the flamistam “A” fits into the whatch-a-ma-hu-zit “B” before you can squeeze in the gyro-whose-it “C” which doesn't seem to be in the box that's buried under the torn wrapping paper. I suppose it's not like years gone by when I was sticking stickers onto Transformers and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles or helping prepare cupcakes in the Easy Bake Oven, but there's always something for me to put together on Christmas morning.

One of the first things I usually do is find the printed directions, unfold them carefully and flatten them out on the floor in front of me. Then I look at them read them in Japanese and Spanish, crumble them up and toss them aside. ‘Cause who needs instructions?

I don't know about you, but I want to jump right into situations – avoid the directions whenever possible. It's human nature, I think. Despite the fact that some elf at the North Pole has spent numerous hours trying to make the instruction sheet as readable as possible, I think I can do it better, in less steps, arranged in a different order.

Am I right?

In our John the Baptist texts during Advent, we hear John preaching a message which he has adopted from the prophets that came before him. Isaiah's message: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” When Isaiah made the original pronouncement he had in mind the common custom of his time for preparing for the arrival of royalty. Whenever a king would visit, he would first send ahead of him an advance party which would see that all things necessary were prepared for the visit. The roads, especially, were smoothed and ruts were filled so that the trip would not be too strenuous.

John the Baptist saw himself as an advance man – challenging the people to repent and smooth out the rough places of their lives – fill the ruts and potholes – so that they would be ready for the one who would rule unlike and other, the Messiah.

Remember, John's not preaching about some far off, distant event that might happen someday. He's not trying to convince the people about a birth that's about to happen in Bethlehem. Jesus had already been born 30 or so years before we find John preaching in the wilderness. John and Jesus are about the same age – cousins according to Luke's Gospel – John born to Elizabeth, Mary's cousin who she visited when she discovered she was pregnant and wasn't sure what to do. So John isn't preaching about preparing for the Messiah to be born – he already thinks the Messiah is here – he's preaching about something that's right around the corner, literally.

In my favorite Christmas TV special – well, I guess my favorite DVD now – “Charlie Brown's Christmas,” Charlie says to Linus, “Everything I do turns into a disaster.” And Linus answers, “You're the only person in the world, Charlie Brown, who can take a wonderful thing like Christmas and turn it into a problem.”

But, of course, we know Linus is wrong, because most of us every year take something as wonderful as Christmas and turn it into a problem just like poor 'ole Charlie Brown – “Good grief!” That's why we love Charlie Brown so much – he reminds us of us.

Rather than it all being a wonderful, joyous celebration of God's grace and love offered to us in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, we get all bent out of shape and at our wits end, running around preparing for all the wrong things. We blow our budgets, run up our credit cards, jam our calendars full of meaningless things, we lose our tempers, and we forget what is really important and essential in our Christmas preparation. It's sort of like trying to change the oil without having bought the new oil – like trying to put together the new what-cha-ma-call-it without reading the directions.

Preacher and his family were on their way to church one Christmas Eve for the candlelight service. On the way, the preacher's young son asked him a poignant question. "Dad, are you going to let us enjoy Christmas or are you going to try to explain it to everybody again this year?"

There it is, isn't it? How complicated we make our Christmas celebration. We try to do as much as we possibly can to get ready for Christmas – we even add extraneous pieces to the plans just because we think it has to be more elaborate. But what we really end up doing is complicate it and place more burden on our Christmas with a lot of unnecessary junk. We Charlie Brown our Christmas.

How much of our prep-work is really about getting ready to celebrate God's precious gift in Jesus' birth? How much have we reflected on what it all truly means? Better yet, how much time have we spent just enjoying the Jesus-gift rather than trying to explain it? Or explain it away, even? How many moments of simply absorbing the reality of the coming of Christ and of giving thanks to God have we left for ourselves as we prepare for the celebration?

My guess is that we would feel so much better if we received the joy that this third candle represents and let ourselves be filled with the expectancy of the coming of the Christ. If we would just

let ourselves be filled with the expectation that should accompany any birth we would find the celebration much more fulfilling.

"When all else fails, read the directions." For John the Baptist, the directions were simple. "Prepare the way." Not prepare for an office party or for gifts under the tree – prepare for the coming of the Messiah, for God to break into the world in a very new way.

"Make the paths straight." Open your loves to God's forgiving love. Be as filled with expectation as the people who heard and believed the Baptist's message.

God made a choice. God chose not to intimidate us or condemn us or command or threaten or reject us. God chose to be with us – Emanu-el – God-with-us.

God chose to endure our frustrations, live with our pain, struggle with our emotions. God chose to experience the trauma of childbirth, the degradation of poverty, the tragedy of homelessness and the pangs of hunger in a very personal way.

Celebrate that! Prepare the way of the Lord! Be filled with expectation!

God came with an offer of new life – an offer of peace – an offer of forgiveness. God came to be with us in Jesus. Prepare again for that reality to be celebrated this year. Prepare the way ...

Amen.