

He wasn't the first with this kind of message. It wasn't unique what he was saying. They had heard it all before, and ignored it before too. Prophets had come and gone. Prophets had entered their towns and villages proclaiming that God was mad, that they deserved retribution because God was mad, and that their time was limited. Yawn. Whatever. For so many it went in one ear and out the other.

He was different. His coming, his message, even the response to his message had all been predicted before he came. Others had written about him before he came, identified his message before he preached it, and gave hints as to how he would live and act. It was declared that he would live out in the desert. It was declared he would proclaim the Word of God. His message would be "Repent". He would be a preacher of repentance.

Times have changed since that prophet came. Many things have happened. But human beings, you and me, we're still the same. We still need to hear the message he shared. Even as we watch for Christmas to come, maybe because we're watching for Christmas to come, we need his message of repentance even more. That's just what God gives to us to consider today from the gospel, a preacher with a message we need to hear. Today we're...

**Watching with the preacher of repentance**  
**Prepared to receive forgiveness**  
**Prepared to see salvation**

From a distance the paint job looked great. It was only when I got close and examined the details that I got depressed. Missed spots, light areas, streaks, they were all there when you got close. Examining the details of the gospel writer Luke gives some depressing facts. Naming Tiberius Caesar and Pontius Pilate shows that Rome was firmly in control in Israel and the world. Under this rule the Jews were oppressed. They could do nothing about it. Within Judaism itself the high priesthood was an embarrassment. Normally there was to be one high priest. In this case Rome deposed the first. The Jews didn't want Rome telling them what to do, so they kept the first while Rome elevated a second. In a power struggle there were two high priests at the time. Into this political and social mess came God's appointed messenger.

News started spreading in the city of a preacher out in the desert. His behavior was more than a little odd, his message harsh at times, but ultimately people flocked to him. He was something to see. **"He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."** Walking out into the desert caused people to leave behind what was comfortable and normal. They stepped into a harsh environment not fit for habitation. Here they could think, ponder, and question their lives. And the preacher of repentance made them do all of that and more. He asked them to take a good long hard look at themselves. John heralded God's message to the people.

How do you think people heard the hard message? How would you? It was a law message. John got good at stacking people's sins up against them and showing them just how wrong before God they were. Now God asks you to take a long hard look. Sin is easy to see in others, but not so much when we're looking at our own lives. All those items you "borrow" from work seem to end up at your house for personal use, but that can't be sinful. Sometimes you flirt with the person across the aisle or across the street even though you're married, it isn't sinful as long as we don't do anything right? Puffing myself up with arrogance and pride to make myself feel superior and others feel lower, that's just positive talk not sin. Some of these are even sins we'd love to hold on to. I kid myself that pride builds my self-esteem. Greed doesn't harm anyone. A little innocent look at online pictures of the opposite sex once and while doesn't hurt. All these sins condemn us. The hard message leaves us feeling anything but good.

Now what to do about it? Could we feel bad and still make things right? No one coming to John in the desert was in the right mind to change their situation. They could feel bad, the law was really good at making people feel bad. But repenting of their sins, surrendering to God, deciding or inviting God into their lives, none of those were options they could do. Feeling bad about sin isn't repenting. To get anywhere John couldn't leave them in their sins. So he proclaimed an event, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism was not just the next step in the process of feeling bad and getting right with God. Baptism wasn't to show God how sorry or sad they were. Baptism wasn't something they did for God, it was something God did for them. John baptized and that baptism worked repentance and forgiveness of sins. That baptism was a work of God in people's hearts. It changed them as they were led to repent. They were really forgiven.

Things are still the same today. God is still turned favorably towards sinners. He pardoned you and me. John prepared the way for the event that allowed God in his grace to forgive us. John proclaimed, preached, and pointed to the Messiah who was coming. **"A voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."** The declaration still today is the gospel good news. Baptism is already good news. God applies forgiveness of sins directly to you in baptism. It connects you directly to the Messiah, Christ Jesus. Real pardon for your sins and real sending those sins away is what God accomplished when Jesus went to the cross. See your Savior in Jesus, see what he did, what he was, what God already has done for you through him. Hear that your sins are forgiven. The burden of guilt you carry is lifted off. Freedom comes only from Christ. We watch with the preacher of repentance prepared to receive forgiveness.

John had his work cut out for him. The people were messed up. Their hearts were like roads leading into a country that a king prepared to walk on. No king would like bumpy curvy roads. They would need fixing. **“Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.”** John wasn't going to do roadwork. He was going to do heart-work. John prepared people's hearts to receive the Savior. He told them they needed a Savior because sin caused their hearts to get out of alignment from God. Sin weighed their hearts down like in a valley. Sin caused their self-righteousness to soar like a mountain. Nothing would stop the Savior from coming. Valleys and mountains of sin just made it harder however for them to see him and believe in him. And not one came across the roads of their hearts to God. That road only gets traveled in one direction, from God towards them.

Hills, valleys, and rough spots in your life and mine might be leading to the message being missed or ignored. We throw up roadblocks to the message when it seems hard. Often it's those sins we just can't let go of. Jesus wants me to stop my pride? Jesus wants me to live without looking at questionable internet material? God expects me to get rid of greed? These roadblocks of sin make it impossible for you to go to God. There's no such thing as deciding to invite Jesus into your heart. Sin makes that impossible. It's too much of a roadblock.

John was on earth for one purpose. **“All mankind will see God's salvation.”** God used John to reveal his plan of salvation in Christ to the world. Not just the people of his day, but us today too. Jesus is revealed as the one who brings salvation to completion. He ushered in the saving activity of God. God himself prepared your hearts through the gospel. You heard the good news of Christ, any hills and valleys straightened out. You received baptism and forgiveness and those rough spots in the road into your hearts became smooth. God's call to repent now, baptism whenever it happened for you, even hearing the Word of God all carry with them the very power of God enabling you and me to repent and believe. Grace comes with the message of grace.

This isn't self-directed steps to getting right with God. This isn't a step by step plan to gaining forgiveness like first repent, then get baptized, finally God will forgive you. We are prepared, and we see God's plan of salvation active in our lives. With his grace he leads us to repentance. His grace leads you to change your lifestyle. You are prepared to make decisions that are in line with God's desires for your life. Grace and God's power flow through you so you are always prepared to do what is pleasing to God. God continues to show you law and gospel through his Word to keep you not only aware of your deep need for his forgiveness, but also closely connected to the Savior who gives that forgiveness. Motivated by God's gospel message about Christ we can remain watching with the preacher of repentance prepared to see salvation.

John's message wasn't unique, but his arrival signaled the start of something entirely unique. John was a preacher of repentance. He used a message provided by God, and through that message only God worked the results he wanted. People were baptized. They came to know and hear the grace of God. It led them to repent. It led them to know and receive the forgiveness of sins. It put them on watch. All the same has happened to you. Now you're prepared for that forgiveness from God. Now you're prepared to see God's salvation through Christ.