

# ***Make Ready***

**December 20, 2020**

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**Text: Luke 1:5-17** “To make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

One of my favorite things to do is going to see live music. There’s a rush you get when good music is being played by talented musicians cranked up over a hundred decibels. It just takes you into a different world and immerses you in a different experience, even if just for a couple of hours.

Most concerts have what’s called an opening act and their job is to get the crowd warmed up. They aren’t the headliner you are coming to see, and they tend to not be nearly as good as the main act. The opener will do things like yell out, “Are you ready for the headliner?” and everyone goes nuts! That’s their job; to prepare everyone for the main act.

This is what happens in Luke’s story of Jesus. Instead of going straight to Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Luke starts with a couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth giving birth to their son, John the Baptist. The story works like an opening act, getting us ready for the main event. And John the Baptist’s ministry was like an opener for Jesus, too!

Zechariah was a priest and Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron, which means they had their Jewish credentials locked in. **Luke 1:6-7:** *“Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly... Not only was their heritage impressive, they obeyed God faithfully, too... **But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.**”*

If you look at their resume, it seems like everything is going for them, but Luke is painting a picture of a couple who had taken some hits despite doing everything right. Their faithfulness, however, wasn’t for nothing. Year after year, they honored God with their lives, and it set them up for what God would do next.

One day, Zechariah is leading a service at the temple and an angel appears right by the altar. I’ve had distractions when I’ve preached before, but that’s a lot. The least the angel could have done is politely waited for the service to conclude! **Luke 1:13-14:** *But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. <sup>14</sup> He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,* Their life of preparation had a purpose. God chose them to help prepare the world for the most significant person that would ever be born.

## **Preparation makes us ready for Jesus.**

My wife and I love to host people at our house. When I was a bachelor, I was fine with people coming over even though things were a mess. If we were eating, I’d just

invite them to grab the closest bag of chips! But when I got married, I learned that this was an incorrect way of doing things! Now I know that when I'm expecting company, I have to prepare for them to come over.

Many of you do the same thing. If you invite someone over to your house for dinner, you figure out the menu. You go to the store and get the ingredients. The house gets cleaned, vacuumed and tidy... or as Pittsburghers would say, you "redd up the hass". Preparation shows we're expecting someone.

Preparation isn't fun to do, either. I mean, who LOVES to clean their house? (Ok, some of you do... I won't try to understand it...). We'd rather order delivery than make dinner. We'd prefer to hire someone else to clean our house rather than do the work ourselves. Even when we watch a show on someone fixing up their house, they don't show you all the work that really goes into it because it's not fun to watch! Instead, they show you a montage that makes it seem easier and faster than it really is.

Many of us would like our spiritual journey to be that way, too. Instead of struggling with doubt or temptation, we could just have a montage where we cut out the boring or challenging bits so we can get to the mountaintop with Jesus.

I know that's certainly true of me. Sometimes, it feels like work to prepare for Jesus to come and I would like to skip that part. For example, this week, I signed up for multiple one-hour timeslots on our 24/7 prayer schedule so that I could meet with God in prayer. I wanted to take time out of the crazy Christmas Season so that I could meet with God in prayer. I know and I love that Jesus meets me in prayer, but I also know it takes time! Time to build the habit and grow in prayer, but also, time to pray! That hour is time I could be doing other things!

I felt like I didn't know how to connect with God in prayer. I had no clue what to say, or how to hear from God. I would hear other followers of Jesus say things like, "The Lord said this to me today..." or I would hear how God answered their prayer. It would make me jealous, because when I tried to pray, I either just wanted to fall asleep or get distracted and bored!

I noticed, however, that the followers of Jesus that I knew who seemed to have the most love, joy and peace in their lives also seemed to be the ones who prayed the most. I wanted to be like that!

So, I started asking God, "Lord, would you teach me how to pray?" I asked those believers what they did when they prayed and even asked if I could join them in their times of prayer. I read books on prayer and listened to sermons online talking about it. And most importantly... I worked at it.

Honestly, if you would have told me years ago that I could not only spend an hour with God in prayer, but enjoy it too, I would've thought I would have needed to be struck by a Holy Spirit lightning bolt to get there. But the reality was that it looked far more

ordinary. Now, I can honestly say that I have regularly seen God answer prayers and heard from him in life-changing ways. The reality is, I had some prep work to do and I still do, but I keep showing up and God works on me!

For Zechariah and Elizabeth, their whole life was preparing them for what God would bring about in their life. They faithfully lived for God for years and now an angel shows up at Zechariah's office telling him how God is going to use their son to prepare the world for Jesus. The angel tells Zechariah in **verse 17** that their son, John the Baptist, is going to *"make ready a people prepared for the Lord."* John's job is to make others ready for Jesus. He's a model for us to know how to prepare for Jesus, too.

I want to share 3 ways this passage shows how we can prepare for Jesus and I invite you to ask God which one of these things he would like you to do this week.

**How do we prepare for Jesus? First, set aside good things to make room for the main thing. *Luke 1:15 he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.***

The angel describes how John the Baptist's ministry will be marked by self-discipline. Elsewhere we learn that he lives on the outskirts of society in the wilderness with a diet of locust and honey. This verse tells us that he's not going to have any alcohol either. He's a bit like a Roman Empire era Luke Skywalker, living out in the middle of nowhere. But instead of drinking alien milk and training Rey to be a Jedi, John is going to snack on some locusts and train others in what it means to repent.

Why on earth would someone live like that? Is it because they don't like fun things? No, it's because John was being obedient to God's call on his life. He was like a living arrow, pointing to God and showing others how to turn away from the trappings of the world. People were drawn to him by the peculiar way he lived and he used that opportunity to help them get ready for what God was about to do.

It's not like there was something wrong with living in society, eating normal food and having an occasional drink. It's that the good things in life made people lose focus on what was supposed to come first. John helped people realize it.

There's a saying, "you can have too much of a good thing." Sometimes we need to press pause on a good thing so we have room for the main thing.

To be a follower of Jesus means that we can enjoy good things without being mastered by them. This is why Jesus says to *"Seek first the kingdom of God..."* When we put God first, we avoid letting our priorities get out of order.

There's nothing wrong with enjoying movies, family activities, using social media, or working hard at our job. These are good things. It's when these things become amplified that they start to drown out the noise of God's voice. We have so many things competing for our attention these days.

Henri Nouwen writes, “God’s presence is often a hidden presence, a presence that needs to be discovered. The loud, boisterous noises of the world make us deaf to the soft, gentle and loving voice of God.”

Sometimes we need to Marie Kondo our life. Maybe you saw her show *Tidying Up* a couple of years back, where she helps people with houses that are impossibly cluttered and messy and brings it into order. People had accumulated so many things that they wanted in their house that they couldn’t even enjoy their home anymore! Marie would have people pile up their belongings and show them one item at a time. Then she would ask, “Does this spark joy?” If the answer was “Yes,” they kept it. If not, they got rid of it.

That’s an approach that we can take with our life with Jesus because we’ve brought so much clutter into our lives that we can’t enjoy Him. Sometimes we’re so afraid to miss out, so we say “yes” to everything, but we don’t make enough room for who comes first. In that case, we’ve got to “redden up” our lives so that there’s room enough for Jesus.

How can you make space for Jesus in your life? How will you let God set your priorities so that you can put Jesus first? **To prepare for Jesus, we must also remember who we are. Luke 1:16** *He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.*

John the Baptist would bring the people back to God because many had drifted away. They lost sight of their identity as God’s children. How? Well, Jews had waited hundreds of years for the coming messiah and it wasn’t always easy to live faithfully. God’s laws started to seem impractical.

The Romans had taken over with their unjust rule and some Jews got so fed up that they eventually felt like the only option they had was to resort to violence. People around them worshipped whatever gods were the most convenient and it was hard for them to meet another Jewish spouse, so they married who they could. It was hard to provide for their families with the Roman taxes, so some started getting jobs that made them get their money in an unethical way. Most Jews did what they felt they had to do in order to get by, but it meant compromising their convictions. They hardly looked like God’s chosen anymore.

It’s common to slowly drift away from who we really are as God’s children and we don’t always see it happening. Little by little, the enemy of our souls tempts us to compromise so that we stop resembling our identity as God’s child.

John Mark Comer writes, “Satan doesn’t show up as a demon with a pitchfork and gravelly smoker voice or as Will Ferrell with an electric guitar and fire on Saturday Night Live. He’s far more intelligent than we give him credit for. Today, you’re far more likely to run into the enemy in the form of an alert on your phone while you’re reading your Bible or a multiday Netflix binge or a full-on dopamine addiction to Instagram or a

Saturday morning at the office or another soccer game on a Sunday or commitment after commitment after commitment in a life full of speed.”

It's like swimming with a current at the beach. You don't realize how far you've drifted until we see where you used to be!

One of the things in my life that makes me drift is my own busyness. Especially when I was going through seminary. Work, being a dad, a husband, plus papers, reading, and projects all meant that the to-do list didn't stop! After lots of deadlines, I tend to be a bit on edge and far less patient. I drift and stop acting like God's child. One practice that has helped me to remember who I am is taking a Sabbath every week. For 24 hours, I stop working! Not because I have nothing to do, but so that I can rest and remember that God is who runs the world; not me. It's one way I can stay anchored in my identity in Christ.

So, are there things in your life that have made you drift away from your identity as a child of God? What can you do to stay anchored in Christ?

**Finally, to prepare for Jesus, we must keep a soft heart. *Luke 1:17 He will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous.***” In other words, John will soften people's hearts so that they're ready to receive Jesus' life.

In a difficult and divisive year, it's easy to let ourselves become cynical and bitter. We get disillusioned and just think that everyone and everything is horrible, so I'll just get what I can for myself in life.

This is what happens with Scrooge in the *Christmas Carol*. He's a hardened man who is miserable and sees no point in doing anything for anyone else. He's a tyrant for his workers, he slams the door in the face of people asking for charity, and he takes what he can for himself. But we find out Scrooge was this way because of a painful event in his past where he had his heart broken, we learn that his hardened heart was a defense mechanism.

Pain has a way of hardening our hearts over time, if we let it. We pray, but we stop expecting God to answer or we show up at our small group but don't become vulnerable with others because you just don't want to trust people again.

How can you recapture a sense of wonder in God's love in this season? What would it look like for you have a childlike faith?

When we make room for Jesus as the main thing, when we ensure that our identity is found in him, when our hearts are soft towards him, and we make ourselves ready for Christ to come and make us new.