

*Mal. 3:1–4*  
*Luke 1:68–79*  
*Phil. 1:3–11*  
*Luke 3:1–6*

# Prepare the Way

**Goal for the Session**      *Adults will consider contemporary actions that keep faith with John’s call for preparation and repentance.*

## ■ P R E P A R I N G   F O R   T H E   S E S S I O N

### Focus on Luke 3:1–6

#### WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Mariam J. Kamell

This baptism is one of preparation for the impending judgment, an acceptance that repentance alone—not status, blood, or ritual—can bring about forgiveness when the judgment arrives. In Luke’s setting, then, John’s baptism is the preparation for the ministry, life, and death of Jesus, because those who accept John’s call show themselves humble before God and willing to submit to God’s word, ready to acknowledge the Messiah of the Lord. The first step in preparing for the coming of the Lord is repentance from sins, a message that reverberates from the Hebrew prophets and is highly relevant to the Advent season.

#### WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen

The Advent Sunday message is linked with the final advent of eschatological salvation, which includes not only the chosen nation but also the nations. At the day of Pentecost to which our text also points, the Spirit was poured out on “all flesh” as an anticipation of the final salvation. A key theological theme in Luke is the inclusion of all in God’s salvific invitation and reaching out: both men and women, poor and rich, Gentiles and Jews. This Advent Sunday is a great place for us to be reminded of that.

#### SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Wesley D. Avram

The warrant for John’s ministry, from Isaiah 40, reinforces this imperative in its own way. The voice in the wilderness cries out for the way of God to be prepared with relentless urgency. This urgency can be heard as a call to rhetorical sensitivity among those who proclaim the word of faith. Here is dramatic imagery for making connection, for finding available means to communicate so that God’s desire for creation might be known: straightened paths, valleys and mountains made into plains, rocky ways made even (Isa. 40:4–6).

#### NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Kathy Beach-Verhey

John did understand how a people ought to welcome their God. His challenging words called people to self-examination, along with a “to do” list, if they were going to be ready to receive the one coming after him. John’s prophetic message called people to get ready to receive Jesus. John’s challenge is to repent and prepare. True repentance (*metanoia* in the Greek) means literally to change one’s mind, turn around, reorient oneself. John calls all people to turn to God and from sin, to seek God’s forgiveness, and to prepare the way of the Lord.

**FOCUS SCRIPTURE**

*Luke 3:1–6*

## Focus on Your Teaching

Take stock of the “voices” that clamor for your and your group members’ attention in this season. Mass mailings solicit year-end contributions to deserving and sometimes not-so-deserving charities. TV ads wrap sales pitches in the guise of what will make the best gift ever. Celebrities are linked to such appeals, for fame can be highly marketable in making a message persuasive or palatable. But other voices sound from the margins, and marginalized, that beckon Advent’s preparation. This session considers one such voice, whose message summons new minds and new actions to prepare for God’s coming in our midst.

*Guide me, Holy God, that your voice of Advent preparation and repentance may be discerned in this session’s words and activities, in hopes of its embodiment afterwards. Amen.*

**YOU WILL NEED**

- Bibles
- Advent wreath with four candles, lighter, table, cloth
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for December 16, 2018

For Responding

- option 1: board or newsprint and markers
- option 2: copies of Resource Sheet 1, 2

## LEADING THE SESSION

### GATHERING

*In advance of the session, cover a table with a cloth and place the Advent wreath on top.*

Welcome adults and introduce any guests or visitors.

Have adults identify things that require preparation (e.g., making a meal, going on a trip). Invite participants to discuss connections between those sorts of preparations and the kind of preparing we do before Christmas during Advent. Ask:

- ✿ What preparations help us draw closer to the spirit of Advent and Christmas?
- ✿ What preparations seem more like “busy work” that get in the way of that spirit?

Note that today we will be listening to a biblical “voice” who speaks of what it means to prepare to receive the coming Christ.

Light two candles on the wreath, and offer this prayer:

*God, in all the noise of this season, open us to hear your voice, wherever and from whomever it may sound, bidding us to prepare for your coming. In Jesus Christ. Amen.*

The church has long seen Advent's preparation as inseparable from the ministry of John the baptizer. Every year of the three-year lectionary cycle, the Gospel readings for the second and third Sundays of Advent always focus on John.

## EXPLORING

Affirm that while Advent serves in the church as a prelude to the birth of Jesus, the texts of Advent are often set in times long after that birth, involving characters besides Jesus. Relate how in this and coming weeks, the focus texts from Luke's Gospel will move back and forth in such a fashion. Today's focus passage is a case in point as it recounts the preaching of John the baptizer, who would have been less than a year older than Jesus (see Luke 1:26, where the "sixth month" relates back to Elizabeth's pregnancy).

Ask for a volunteer to read Luke 3:1–6 aloud to the group. Pause for comments or questions. Next, read the "So What?" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1 as well as Isaiah 40:3–5. Note that, as Isaiah offered hope for the exiles in Babylon, John is here offering hope to those who have come out to hear him in the wilderness. Ask adults to compare and contrast how these words might have been heard in both of those settings.

Other Hebrew and Christian Scriptures provide insights into understanding and interpreting John's ministry, including two such readings in today's lections. Form two groups. Assign one group Malachi 3:1–4, a passage the church has traditionally associated with the ministry of John the Baptist. Assign the other group Luke 1:68–79, a passage that reflects how John's ministry was anticipated not only by his father Zechariah but likely seen in retrospect by the community Luke addressed. Have each group read and discuss the passage guided by these two questions, and prepare a brief summary of their conversations with the whole group:

- ✪ What does this passage reveal about how John the Baptist's ministry was interpreted?
- ✪ What light does this passage shed on the season and preparations of Advent?

Gather the whole group, and offer the summaries. Discuss points of connection between the two passages, and how these "contexts" inform the way Luke 3:1–6 introduces John.

Reread Luke 3:6 followed by the "Where?" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Lift up the connection made in the excerpt between "all flesh" and the overall theme in Luke of God's inclusivity when it comes to the invitation of salvation. Discuss:

- ✪ Who might have welcomed John's pronouncement of God's salvation being seen by "all flesh" in John's day; why?
- ✪ Who might have been threatened by John's pronouncement of God's salvation extended to all in John's day; why?
- ✪ What might we learn about the Advent preparations John summons in our day from those diverse reactions?

Have adults brainstorm ideas about what they understand by "repentance." Note the insight in the "Now What?" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1 of the literal meaning of the Greek word translated as repentance is "to change one's mind" or "to turn around." Recall the voices identified in Gathering. Challenge adults to silently consider: What are the "changes in mind" and "turnings" that would help us as individuals, and churches, to engage in the kinds of preparation that John preaches—and that Advent seeks—in order to "prepare the way of the Lord"?

EASY  
PREP

One option for opening this activity: have participants identify a parallel list to Luke 3:1–2 of today’s “who’s who” of political and religious leaders. Then move on to where (and why) John’s “leveling” message might need to be sounded elsewhere.

## RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Advent Preparations** What might your congregation do this Advent that would model John’s call to prepare? List all your congregation’s activities scheduled between now and Christmas. Ask of each activity: How does this engage us in John’s call to “prepare the way of the Lord”? Identify other important Advent preparations not reflected in that list. Ask: How can we incorporate those into our own disciplines for responding to John’s call?
- 2. Journaling John’s Call** Advent’s preparation bids individuals to take stock of how they heed John’s call to repentance. Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (Reflecting on Repentance). Have individuals fill out the prescribed journal entries that engage in a “dialogue” with the “So What?” and “Now What?” excerpts on Resource Sheet 1. Affirm that entries need not be shared with anyone, but encourage participants to use their reflections on a daily basis as a discipline for observing this season of Advent.
- 3. Listening for John Today** The power of John’s call relies on bringing it to bear on our lives today. Recall the juxtaposition in Luke 3:1–2 of all the “VIPs” with the wilderness figure of John. Discuss:
  - ✪ In what unexpected places, and unexpected words, is the call to prepare God’s way sounded today? Keep in mind the Isaiah imagery associated with John’s work of leveling high and low places so that exiles could return home.
  - ✪ What are the rough places—and rough way—in need of leveling: in our lives as individuals; in our social and political relationships? Identify ways in which we as individuals and as a congregation can provide such a “voice” in our words, actions, and witness.

## CLOSING

Gather in a circle around or in front of the Advent wreath. Have adults silently recall the conversations and activities of this session. Offer the opportunity for everyone in the group to answer the following out loud, while respecting the silence of those who would be uncomfortable doing so: What do you consider the most important thing you will carry with you from this time together—and how will it change your Advent preparations?

Offer the following as an Advent benediction, noting Luke attributes it to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist:

*By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for December 16, 2018, or e-mail it to the participants early in the week so that they have adequate time to reflect on the Scripture passages and the excerpts throughout the coming week.

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## Reflecting on Repentance

Read the “So What?” and “Now What?” excerpts on Resource Sheet 1. Keep them physically as well as spiritually before you as you frame the words of your journal entry.

If repentance is a change of mind, a turning around, a reorientation: what is it in your life, in this moment, that stands in greatest need of repentance; why?

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Knowing that Isaiah, and then John, addressed the “wilderness voice” to prepare God’s way to a community as well as individuals: what do you see in your congregation, or the wider community, and the world, that stands in need of change and reorientation?

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Reflect on one or two ways you will commit to engage your voice in that call this week to ways in need of straightening: for example in the “leveling” brought by insistence on justice or the practice of compassion or the inclusion of those otherwise excluded (see also “Where?” excerpt).

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