



How much does it take to prepare for something? That all depends on who you are and what you are preparing for. It is estimated that the Chinese government spent over 40 billion dollars to prepare for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. At that time, it was the most expensive sports event in history. But was surpassed by Russia when it spent an estimated 50 billion getting things ready for the 2014 Olympics in Sochi. These two governments were willing to undergo large reconstruction projects and enormous building feats. Why did they put so much into preparing? It was mostly done to make an impression on everyone visiting the Olympics. Today we are going to be looking at an even greater preparation for a far greater event. And it requires construction and preparation that is simply out of this world. How does someone prepare for God's coming to this world? We find the answer this morning as we consider God's Word in Luke chapter three.

God's coming to this world is an event which has long been planned out. From all eternity God knew he would create this world and step into it. We read of just one of those announcements of his coming in Malachi 3. It says he will come with judgment and the refiners fire. "Who can stand in the day of his coming?" How do you prepare for such an event?

Many have made no effort to prepare for God's coming. They only hope they will never have to deal with him in their lives. They dismiss the miraculous first coming and dismiss his prophesied second coming. So, they aren't prepared. It can be unpleasant when there are unexpected house guests—how much more when God is the one visiting? How will that go? You can't hide. He came once and will come again.

Others think they are prepared because they've obtained the right papers. "I've got my church membership, my confirmation certificate." Does God care about that when he comes, or will he be more concerned about what is written on our hearts? When someone is guilty of adultery, can they get ready for God by getting the proper government papers? God's papers say, "Be Holy. Do not commit adultery." How will that visit go?

Others think they are prepared because they've buried their wrongs in the past. But they've never really dealt with them. They've tried to hide them. That didn't plan has never played out well (Consider many biblical examples: Cain, Achan, David). You can't hide from God.

Some try to gloss over their guilt. When China got ready for the Olympics it had a few things left to clean up as the deadline approached. Unsightly buildings were demolished and covered. Smog was still a big problem in the city. So, they made some extreme temporary regulations so that the smog would clear up. In short, it was clean. At least looked clean on the surface. That's the type of cleaning you might do at home on short notice. I have to admit, and its often my fault, our home isn't always in pristine condition. Sometimes when visitors are coming, we need to quickly clean. We need to stop treating our countertop like a storage place for dirty dishes. And we need to pick up all the children's toys that make it look like we just survived hurricane Barthel. But that is all it really takes. At least things look cleaner on the surface.

That's how some work to prepare for God's coming. Many prepare to pull the wool over God's eyes. They think that if they clean the surface, they're ready. They try to avoid sexual immorality. They try to keep their lives clean. They try to be honest, faithful, and good. But God's coming demands perfect preparation of the heart. Those who are only outwardly clean in this world dare not invite God to see what is in their hearts. "God won't bother looking in my closet, I hope."

We are tempted to prepare with the same methods. We might desire to just hide a few things from God. We might think he won't examine our hearts. We might think we have proper papers. We might reason we have buried our sins in the past. We try to clean the surface. But it all fails. To think that we have somehow made ourselves ready for our God's coming is to be gravely mistaken. "I'm not openly rebellious God, like those who openly practice sexual immorality," says the heart that sometimes shuts God out at the door saying, "not right now God," because it is harboring sinful thoughts. "I haven't committed adultery," says the heart that really knows that whoever has even impure thoughts is guilty. "I certainly haven't committed murder," says the heart that is struggling at times to forgive someone, wanting to hold a grudge. "I never hurt people," says the same heart that is guilty of hurting others with selfish speech and failed to show love. Putting up a façade doesn't make us ready. It only hides the ugly guilt that we try to conceal from our Maker.

When God comes, he will see it all. And he will deal with it if we don't cover the ugly guilt on our hearts and hands. China had to deal with some businesses and apartments that it couldn't bulldoze. And the owners lacked the means to beautify their property. So, to hide some buildings that were considered unsightly some brick walls were built and screens were put up. Businesses and residents found people appearing with loads of bricks in their neighborhoods with police escorts. They laid tall brick walls to hide some areas of the city. Imagine how that felt for them! How much more shouldn't our Maker put up a wall between himself and sinners? To get ready for our God we don't need a simple housekeeping, we need a massive reconstruction project! Or we need God to tear us down, toss us into the fire, and put up a wall to separate us from himself forever.

Who is truly ready for his coming? Something must be done to prepare us for the coming of our holy, perfect, and eternal God. Otherwise we would refuse him, flee from him, and carry the guilt of an unkempt heart. We, and this entire world, would be unready for the coming of the only guest to this earth that ever really mattered.

That's why God prepares us for his coming. Luke records how God prepared the way for the greatest coming in history: *"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert."*

This was all God's plan. It was no accident, but a real event in history which God had planned out long before hand. On roughly the year 26 AD God's preparation entered full swing. John, the son of Zechariah was a man sent to prepare the world for God's coming. Over 400 years earlier he was prophesied by Malachi to come as the forerunner of the Messiah. Before his birth the angel told his father Zechariah, "And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

John began as *"the word of the LORD came to him."* God gave him the words to share. In the wilderness, he prepared people by preaching "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Through the Word of the LORD, John convicted people of their sin. The Holy Spirit convicted hearts of their condition, the guilt they carried in the closets of their hearts. And John, through the Word of the gospel and baptism brought people to repentance. Repentance is the reconstruction that God worked: turning hearts from refusal of God, to trusting in God. Turning hearts from rebellion against God, to desiring to serve God. Repentance means turning from all our own failed devices to deal with sin and coming before God with the plea "Lord, cover my sin. Have mercy on me, a sinner." By God's working people came to see their grave need for cleansing from sin. And John pointed them to, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Baptizing them with water they received the forgiveness of sins, looking forward to the coming of their God!

God had sent John to begin a massive reconstruction project. It was foretold through Isaiah: *"A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.⁵ Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth."*

Then in a most unexpected way God came. He came in such lowliness he was not recognized by those unprepared. Jesus, the only Son of God was seen by the eyes of ordinary human beings! In three short years he would be the center of attention. There the High Priests Annas and Caiaphas would look upon him. They would refuse to accept him. Herod the Tetrarch of Galilee would see him and mock him. Pontius Pilate would have him flogged and crucified. They crowd that surrounded him would not welcome him as a king but mock him as a dying criminal. Some welcome!

But in grace he came to a world which he knew would reject him. He came to take every wrong upon himself. So that a wall wouldn't be built between us and our God our God came down to us to cleanse our hearts. And he willingly endured it all, even to the point of death, even to the point of suffering the agony of hell on the cross. In our place the Son of God was separated from the Father's love on the cross. He took our sin. The world, so unprepared to meet him, killed him. All this he did to be our deliver, to be our salvation. By his love, he prepared a way for us to meet him.

He who died rose to life. Jesus will return to judge the world. He will not come as a lowly child, but as the eternal exalted King. And all mankind will see him –God's salvation. Who can stand in the day of his coming? You can through repentance. You can through the washing and renewal that comes with baptism. You will stand through Jesus.

God sent John to prepare the hearts to the people for the coming of their God. He has sent a messenger in your life who has called you to repentance and to faith in Jesus. By faith in him we know every thought and action that made our hearts unready to welcome God were placed on the cross of Jesus. Maybe it was your father. Maybe it was a Christian friend or family member. God sent them into your life.

And God has not just done this for you. It is massive project that has changed hearts all over the world from running and rejecting God to ready for his coming. You see, God's coming isn't just to the people of Israel. It is a big event. God prepares his coming to the world. All mankind will see it. Be prepared through his Word and Sacrament -his forgiveness. It's not a surface cleaning. It's a washing of forgiveness in baptism. It's a major reconstruction of the heart. It is repentance and faith. And it is worked by the author and perfecter of our faith.

Until the day that our Lord comes again visibly to this earth, God will continue to send his messengers. As you and I go out and meet people this Christmas season we too prepare the way for Christ's coming. When you meet somebody who is not prepared for the LORD's coming share the Word of the Lord with them. By this word, and by baptism, God will carry out a massive reconstruction project! He will continue to change hearts through repentance and faith.

How much does it take for God to prepare something? There is no obstacle too big, no guilt too large, no sinner too lost, no heart too hard that God will not go to the greatest lengths and share the highest love to prepare it for his coming. He did that for you in your baptism. He still does it for you today. He's coming soon. Amen.