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theme: Be Prepared (Luke 3:1-20)

materials: Bibles, news story, paper, pencils

welcome

How prepared are you in the event of an emergency? What are the first things you would do if you faced a natural disaster or other equally disturbing occurrence?

Bring in a news item about your neighbourhood, city, country or world that you can discuss with the cell. Where do you see God in this story? Ask other members of cell to bring in stories to discuss in subsequent weeks.

worship

Where have you seen God this week? Where have you experienced community this week?

What do you do with sin in your life? How do you deal with it? If you ask forgiveness from other people, how do you do it? If you ask forgiveness from the Lord, how?

Is there anything you want to share with your cell regarding sins that need to be confessed and repented of? If so, do it now. If you do not want to share, write down anything in your life causing broken relationship with you and the Lord, or with you and others. Pray together for the boldness to confess, repent and be forgiven. Share your list with at least one other person this week whom you trust.

word

Have different people read *Luke 1:67-79; 2:29-32; and 3:1-20* (we will be focusing on the last passage).

What are some of the connections between all these passages?

Who were the people listed at the beginning of this passage (3:1-2) and why do they matter?

What was John the Baptist's message?

Why did people need to repent in order to prepare the way of the Lord?

Could John's water baptism forgive people's sins?

Why did John call certain people "vipers", and what "trees" are going to be cut down?

What is the "fruit" of repentance?

How do we apply John's teaching to our own lives now?

Think about all we have read about John the Baptist. How is his life and ministry, described by Luke, similar to Jesus' life and ministry?

How are they different? In particular, what is the difference between the baptism John offers, and the baptism Jesus offers?

What does it mean that Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire?

Are you prepared for the coming of the Lord? If so, how? If not, what do you think you need to do?



witness

John is here telling people of the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. He is warning them to be ready when he comes so that they are not “bad trees” bearing bad fruit that get cut down and burned, but rather good trees bearing the good fruit of repentance. Who are you telling about the coming of the Lord? Who are you warning about the coming judgment? Who are you calling to repentance (assuming you are bearing the good fruit of repentance yourself)? This is urgent! Don’t fail to tell the people you love that Jesus is coming.

If you are in Vancouver, join in with one of 614’s outreach ministries such as League of Mercy, Night Vision, or Street Combat.

action points

Continue reading through the entire books of Luke and Acts with one other person. If the other person is a fellow believer, read them through in a public place, like a café (not yelling it out or anything, just reading it to one another). Make a regular time to come in and read together, and more likely than not someone will eventually ask you what you are reading and why.

If the other person is not a fellow-believer, perhaps choose a less public place to read, but again set regular times, daily if possible, to get together and read the Gospel. You don’t have to read it all at once. Read two to three chapters at a time, and then meet another day to read some more.

The Salvation Army sponsors children around the world who are living in circumstances of poverty and oppression. Any offerings given at cell meetings go towards covering the costs of these sponsorships. Please challenge your cell to bring loose offerings each week, and bring a container to collect any such offerings that are given. Cell is also a great time to bring your cartridges or tithes to the Church.

leader’s guide

This passage is carrying on the themes already brought out in the previous two chapters. Zechariah’s prophecy over his son as a prophet of the Most High who will prepare the way of the Lord and call the people to repentance and the forgiveness of sins is being fulfilled through John’s ministry here. Simeon, when he saw the infant Jesus, prophesied that the child would a light for revelation to the Gentiles, just as John quotes (from *Isa 40:3-5*) that *all flesh* will see the salvation of God through Jesus. In other words, what had been seen by Simeon would now be seen by all. These connection points continue on throughout the book of Luke-Acts, such as when John describes Jesus as one who would baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire, and then we later see the disciples being baptised in just such a way at Pentecost (*Acts 1:5*), which itself is a fulfillment of the prophecy found in *Joel 2:28*.

John the Baptist is brought back into the picture here by Luke at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. John is reintroduced in the same way as an Old Testament prophet would be, as one who has received the word of the Lord in the wilderness and is ready to declare it to the nations. John’s ministry is located very specifically in the political and religious context of the world surrounding it, as Luke mentions Caesar, Pilate, Herod Antipas and Philip (sons of the late Herod the Great), Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas (important Jewish religious leaders). These are some of the worldly powers that will eventually become so threatened by the coming of Jesus’ kingdom. Once again we are confronted by the fact that what we are reading here is not intended by Luke to be



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mere religious legend, but rather actual events that played out on the world stage. Luke is not just describing ideas, but events. This happened, in real history, at this time and this place, and it happened for everyone.

John's message, again like that of an OT prophet's, is one of repentance, ethical teaching, the possibility of forgiveness, and a call to look to the One who is coming to save. He even quotes Isa 40:3-5 to hammer home the point that he is standing in the line of Jewish prophets declaring what the Lord is doing. John is clear that he is not the Messiah, not the one they are waiting for, even though some of his followers thought he may have been. His focus is on getting people ready for the arrival of the "Stronger One", and he does so by calling them to be baptised. The actual act of baptism in water was not the point; it was merely a symbol of a deep repentance from sin, as John makes clear when he admonishes the crowd to actually repent, and not just go through the ritual of being cleansed. Being baptised meant nothing if your heart was not changed, and John calls the hypocrites who were looking to escape judgment by the outward ritual "vipers", which referenced local snakes that would flee a brush fire. Simply being descended from Abraham meant nothing as well, if you were not bearing good fruit. A bad tree - that is, a person, group, or system that was not obedient to the Lord, was not producing good works, was unrepentant of sin - was going to be cut down, cut off from God. John's baptism was really preparing people for the baptism that was to come through Jesus, the only baptism that could truly effect the forgiveness of sins and salvation. Repentant hearts would be ready to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit that would fully cleanse sin and bring about righteousness. Unrepentant hearts would not receive this baptism of the Spirit, and were in danger of the coming judgment.

Luke makes a big deal out of John's preaching and teaching that went along with his baptism. He taught the people that they should share what they possessed with those who did not have anything. He accepted the presence of tax collectors and soldiers (more likely Herod's soldiers than soldiers of Rome), two groups that were not well-loved by Jewish people of that time (tax collectors in particular were considered religiously "unclean"). John taught them that they must be honest and upright even in the midst of their "unclean" and often abusive professions. This love, uprightness and justice was not merit that would save you, but rather was the fruit, evidence or by-product of repentance. None of this was new ethical teaching, but stemmed directly from the teachings of Scripture (see Isaiah 58:7, Ezekiel 18:7). We see this type of teaching echoed throughout the rest of the New Testament, with the expectation that being baptised in the Holy Spirit - being cleansed and made righteous by Jesus - will effect a radical change in a person's behaviour and attitude towards others.

John serves as a type of bridge character between the old and the new. He is very much in line with an OT prophet, but he is also announcing the coming of the new covenant with Jesus. John's birth, life, ministry, and even death are very similar to Jesus'. John 's birth was announced with prophecy, his ministry represents a fulfillment of scripture, he preaches repentance and salvation to all regardless of social position, he gets himself in trouble with the authorities (Herod), and is eventually executed. This is also an outline of Jesus' story. The major difference is in the identity of Jesus as the Son of God and Messiah, Jesus' resurrection from the dead, and the effect of their baptisms. John's baptism prepares, but he himself points out that the Stronger One would baptise in a very different way.

The notion that Jesus would pour out the Holy Spirit in baptism was new not in the sense of the Holy Spirit being given, but in the identity of whom would be pouring it out. As mentioned above, the prophecy from Joel 2 does indicate that the Spirit would be poured out on people in the latter days, but the overwhelming understanding was that it would be God who did the pouring. Here John asserts that the Messiah would baptise in this way, and he adds fire as well. Fire was used as a symbol of both cleansing and judging throughout Scripture, so either, or both, could be meant here. There is certainly an element of judgment referred to as John talks about separating the wheat from the chaff. But John is also grounding his prophecy in the context of his baptism concerning repentance and cleansing from sin. He exhorts the people with the "good news", which is the possibility of forgiveness and salvation, but also warns of the consequences of rejecting the call to repentance. The baptism of the Holy Spirit that we see in Acts 2 (which includes fire as well) is one that prompts the disciples to preach about Jesus, salvation, and, once again, the need to repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins. Repentance and the gift of the Spirit must go hand in hand.