Dear First Baptist Church of Sanbornton Family:

Happy Advent. During this busy season, there are so many distractions that can pull us away from the real reason we celebrate Christmas…the birth of Jesus Christ. “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith…” (Hebrews 12:1b-2a).

Blessings to each of you,

Pastor Lynne

“PREPARE THE WAY”: Luke 3:1-6

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Rev. Lynne Hubley

There was a little girl named Jenna and she was very excited to be participating in the church Christmas pageant. The way she talked about it, her mother was sure she was one of the main characters, but Jenna never said what part she had because she wanted it to be a surprise.

The night of the performance came and Jenna’s parents and grandparents were in the audience. One by one the children took their places for the opening scene. The mom could see the shepherds, Mary and Joseph and the 3 wise men. She could see Jenna calmly sitting on a chair off to the side.

The play started and on cue, Jenna got up from her chair and picked up a large tin foil star and walked behind Mary and Joseph and held the star up high for everyone to see. Jenna held the star up for the shepherds and the wise men, as well when they went to see baby Jesus.

The play ended, and on the way home in the car, Jenna said: “I had the main part because I showed everybody how to find Jesus”. Most people would not have considered holding a star to be a main part, but Jenna understood better.

This morning, we are going to look at someone who played a major part in preparing people to receive Jesus.

Before we look at his story, I want to talk about some of the things that people do in this day and age to prepare for Christmas.

As I list some of those things, imagine a person who has come here from a remote country, who has never heard about Christmas, knows nothing about it, but observes the following:

Black Friday, where people flock to the stores to get good deals on Christmas presents (people cutting each other off in traffic and in rushing into the stores)

Massive decorations (I see this more in Massachusetts) –lawns are covered with huge blow up Santas, snow men, reindeer, etc., the Grinch.

IPhones that constantly ding with store ads telling you what gifts you can’t live without.

Christmas movies with titles like Home Alone 2, Lost in New York, Elf, How the Grinch Stole Christmas and Christmas songs like: “Grandma got run over by a reindeer” “All I want for Christmas is my 2 front teeth” Christmas chipmunks”.

Now, imagine, this person from a remote country asks you to tell him what Christmas is all about. You tell him how much God loves us and wanted a relationship with us. That relationship was severed by sin.

You tell him that God chose to come to earth in the form of a baby who would one day sacrifice Himself on a Cross for the forgiveness of our sins, a wonderful relationship with God and one day spend eternity with Him.

This man would be scratching his head looking at you and trying to connect what he observed with what you told him.

Don’t get me wrong, we include secular activities this time of year. I watched The Muppets Christmas Carol on Thanksgiving night.

What do we do to prepare spiritually for the celebration of the birth of Christ? If we don’t make that preparation intentional the secular will crowd it out. Every time! It’s in your face 24/7!

To help us with our intentionality, who better to look at than the man who prepared the way for Jesus. His sole purpose in being born was to prepare people to meet the Messiah. This was a very high calling and John was called to play a main part in that first Christmas story.

Luke 3:1-6

The author, Luke is an historian. It’s important to him to be historically accurate. Luke is setting the climate of this time period when John the Baptist entered the scene.

Luke names 5 high Roman political officials. Four of these men will play significant roles in the Crucifixion of Jesus. They were known for their cruelty and corruption.

Luke names both Annas and Caiaphas when referring to the high priesthood of the temple. Although Caiaphas officially held the office, many recognized his father in law, Annas as the true power behind the office. Both were corrupt showing that the Jewish leaders were more interested in power and politics than in serving God.

These were wicked and evil times. It certainly seemed like the wicked were winning. There had not been a prophetic word of God in over 400 years.

While the power brokers flexed their political muscles the Word of God came to John. It didn’t come to the high priests, but to the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.

The angel Gabriel had told John’s father in Luke 1:16-17:

“He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And 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 –to make ready a people prepared for the Lord”.

It is significant that the Word of God came to John in the wilderness. In the wilderness, John wasn’t influenced by society and culture and politics. He didn’t care about social savvy or cultural relevance.

When He gave God’s message, it was the pure Word of God.

John looked, sounded and acted different from all the religious leaders. People were used to religious leaders dressing in the finest linen, but John was clothed in camel’s hair had a diet of locusts and wild honey. The religious leaders ate the best meat from the sacrifices. God is making quite the contrast. That is very intentional.

If God were happy with the ways things were going, He wouldn’t have sent someone to move in a different direction.

Interesting that John did not speak in the temple in Jerusalem, but he went into all the country around the Jordan preaching a baptism of repentance.

There was no flowery altar call, or moving songs like “Just as I Am”. Today, people flock to mega churches because they are looking to feel good, they are looking to be entertained, they want the drama and show.

Guess what? John had none of that and the multitudes responded to John’s message.

The Word of God that came to John was the fulfillment of a prophecy given by Isaiah over 700 years prior. It’s recorded in Isaiah 40.

We are now in the season of Advent where we prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Using this passage, let’s consider some tangible ways we can prepare.

1. Read and meditate on the Christmas narratives in the Bible. (Matthew and Luke are the most detailed). Ask God to open up your heart to a new awareness, a new revelation of what He actually did in becoming a little baby. Practical suggestion: There are 24 chapters in the Gospel of Luke. Beginning on December 1, try reading a chapter in Luke a day and on Christmas Eve you will have read an entire account of Jesus’ life. You will wake up on Christmas morning with a deeper understanding of WHO and WHY we celebrate.
2. Using the construction imagery that Luke quotes from Isaiah, invite God to do some construction in your own life and ask him to remove any obstacles that are keeping you from preparing for the precious birth. That is the first step.

Busyness, buying into the world and secular definition of Christmas and getting caught up in all of that.

What Valleys need to be filled in? What empty places?

Maybe that valley is a failure, disappointments, financial struggles, marital struggles, –something from the past, a relationship that ended, deep sadness because of a loved one who has died. What valleys in our life need God to do some filling with His love, grace, mercy, forgiveness and His presence?

What mountains need to be made low? What things have become a little too prominent in our lives or have reared their ugly heads: Disbelief, laziness, pride, indifference, wrong priorities, selfishness, addiction, idols, gossip, or a bad attitude.

The second step is about repenting, asking for forgiveness and inviting God to do whatever construction work is needed.

How else can we prepare our hearts?

1. Become like a child again. What do I mean by that? This comes from Luke 18:16-17: “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

Ever heard someone say “Christmas is for kids”. That phrase is sad. What do they mean when they say that? Do they mean they have gotten too old to enjoy celebrating the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ? Maybe it is a longing for when they enjoyed Christmas as a child.

What did Jesus mean?

What do children have that adults often lose? Child-like faith and trust, dependence and sense of wonder at the simple things in life.

How important it is to really take time to look at the Baby in the Manger, to think about who He is and why he came. God wants us to become like a child again in the sense of depending on Him and in our sense of wonder -- and let Him amaze and astound you. Let Him dazzle you with His greatness and goodness and presesnce.

1. Another way we can prepare our hearts is to rediscover the blessing of giving. We New Englanders pride ourselves on being frugal. How many times have we put ourselves first and given God our leftovers. God deserve the first and the best of our financial resources.

Acts 20:35 “It is more blessed to give than to receive”. Giving brings more blessing to the giver than the receiver.

First we give to God and then to others.

When we give to someone in need, it’s something you remember because there is such joy.

When we give a toy to a child who has no parents or who is in prison, or food to someone who lost their job –take the time to visit a shut-in who is so desperately lonely, taking someone out to lunch whose spouse died – send a package to a solider overseas; babysitting for a neighbor’s child whose mom is a single parent so they can go shopping.

Tangible ways we show Christ’s love.

Matthew 25, Jesus tells us that whenever we do these kinds of things, we are doing them for Jesus.

1. Finally, we prepare our hearts by letting our light shine. Matthew 5:16 “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven”.

Jesus, the light of the world, was born during a very dark time in history.

Nothing’s changed. Solomon said it best. “Nothing new under the sun”. We are living in dark times. More and more people have turned away from God. Lawlessness, hopelessness, attacks on Christians, disunity. Yet another variant of Covid. This has been a very tough year for so many people –if you have lost a loved one or suffered financially or lonely (medical field, law enforcement).

This is a time for believers to shine the light of Christ into those dark places. He wants us to live differently and be the light. Time for us to seek out the dark places and figure out how to shine some light. So many people are struggling with depression and hopelessness.

Let’s really open our eyes to the people around us and pay attention to ways we can help.

There had to have been great despair when John the Baptist came on the scene. Political leaders and religious leaders were corrupt. No word of God in over 400 years.

God knew what they needed. They didn’t need a political leader or religious leader to save the day and give them a word. What they needed was the pure word of God from an unlikely man chosen to deliver it.

John the Baptist was the unlikely man, that voice in the wilderness, who prepared the way for Jesus.

How will you prepare the way during this Advent Season?

Amen.