

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *How to Get Ready for Christmas*
Service Theme: *Turn Your Heart, Trust in the Promise, Share the Knowledge of Salvation*

Sermon Theme: *Trust in the Promise* (November 30, 2022)
Luke 1:39-45

How do you get ready for Christmas? Everyone's answer is probably a little different. Some of you have probably been planning, shopping, decorating, and stressing about it for months already. Some of you have probably been counting down the days until December 25th, your anticipation ramping up as more wrapped presents appear beneath the tree. Some of you probably have certain traditions you have to do before it can feel like Christmas, like hanging ornaments, watching The Grinch, or sitting in traffic for 3 hours to see the Girvin Road lights. Some of you probably get ready for Christmas by waking up on Christmas morning to discover for the first time what gifts "you got" for your kids. Getting ready for Christmas looks different from one person to the next.

But what's interesting is how often the things we do to get ready for Christmas actually detract from our ability to get ready for Christmas—at least, getting our hearts ready for what Christmas is really all about, the birth of our Savior Jesus. How easily the buying or receiving of gifts distracts us from the greatest gift we've ever received. How easily the stress and the busyness of making all the preparations robs us of the time to prepare our hearts. How quickly our schedules fill with special meals and gatherings so that we don't have time to gather and be fed with God's Word and Sacraments.

That's why we need help-- help and encouragement to get ourselves and our families ready for Christmas. That's why we're here tonight, to see from God's Word how he got one family ready for the first Christmas, and to see how we can use the same three actions to get

ourselves ready for this Christmas: **1.) Turn Your Hearts** **2.) Trust in the Promise** **3.) Share the knowledge of salvation.**

The family we're talking about was a faithful, godly old man named Zechariah, and his faithful, godly, old, barren wife, Elizabeth. Zechariah served God as a priest. Once, when Zechariah had been "randomly" chosen—I say "random" because God certainly was pulling the strings here—to serve in the Temple in Jerusalem, he was met by an angel of the Lord, who promised an amazing thing to the terrified Zechariah. ***"Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John."***

If the promise of a son being born to his old, barren wife wasn't amazing enough, what the angel told him about his son was even more amazing. ***"He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. He will go on before the Lord...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 was through that miraculous son, John, that God would lead his people to carry out the first part of getting ready for Christmas—**Turn Your Hearts**. We'll talk more in-depth about John's ministry in worship on Sunday, but Mark's Gospel gives us a simple summary: ***"John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."*** Matthew's Gospel gives us John's basic message, ***"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."***

Repentance means to change your mind about sin; to pull a 180, and turn your heart away from sin, and back to God, trusting in God for forgiveness. That was God's purpose for John's ministry—to turn people's hearts away from their sin, their selfishness, away from themselves entirely, and turn them back to God. And in so doing, John would be preparing the people to meet their Lord when Jesus came on the scene!

And we need to do the same as we prepare to meet our Savior once again at Christmas, and especially when he comes again at the Last Day! As we said, it's so easy to become distracted by so many other things this time of year. With a sinful nature stained heart which has selfishness as its factory setting, we need God's Word to turn our hearts away from our sin, and back to him! To get ready for Christmas, we need to humbly and honestly acknowledge that we are sinners, in desperate need of repentance, and in desperate need of a Savior!

That's necessary, because if we don't acknowledge how lost we are on our own, we'll fail to truly appreciate what Christmas is really all about! If we don't take to heart how desperately we need a Savior, it's easy to forget why the birth of our Savior needs to be our primary focus at Christmas!

So, during these days of preparation, honestly reflect on your sin, your failure, your lack of trust. Even Zechariah needed to heed the words his son would one day proclaim, and repent for his lack of faith in God's amazing promise. That's why God gave him 9 months of silence to think about his need for repentance and forgiveness! Hear the words of Zechariah's son, pleading with us to repent, and turn back to God!

Then, **Trust in the Promise.** When Elizabeth was in the 6th month of her miraculous pregnancy, she got a visit from her young cousin Mary. Mary had just received a miraculous promise from the same angel that made the promise to Zechariah—that she, a poor lowly virgin, would be the mother of the Savior. That the Son of God would be conceived in her womb as a true human being by the power of the Holy Spirit! Trusting in that unfathomable promise, Mary went to tell Elizabeth.

But she didn't even get the chance to tell her, because the Holy Spirit was already at work! Luke tells us, ***“When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with***

the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”

The in-utero forerunner of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, leaps in faithful joy, trusting in the promise that he would one day proclaim—***“Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”*** That Savior had come. And Elizabeth, having already trusted in God's amazing promise about the child leaping in her once-barren womb, also trusts in God's promise that the fetus in her virgin cousin's womb was her Savior, and the Savior of all people. And Mary, knowing full well how impossible it was that she was pregnant with the Son of God, trusted in the promise God made to her through the angel Gabriel. As she sang following Elizabeth's faithful words, ***“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”***

These are amazing examples of faith. Repentant sinners, turning their hearts and trusting in the promise of the Savior who would cleanse their hearts from sin by suffering the cross and hell he would grow up to bear.

And for us, those promises might seem impossible too. This baby born in Bethlehem 2 millennia ago is your Savior. Through faith in him alone, you have eternal life. There's nothing you have to do to earn God's love. It is already yours through Christ!

Many of us have heard those promises for so long that we can lose sight of the awe of it all. Far more incredible than even a child born to a barren old woman is a child born to a virgin—a child who just so happens to be the Son of God in human flesh. Never lose your awe for the wonder of that promise!

For others, it might seem too good to be true. Too easy. Can we really stake our lives on something so seemingly impossible? But we can, and we do, because the same Holy Spirit who gave the faith to believe in these unbelievable promises to in-utero John the Baptist, his mother Elizabeth, and her cousin Mary, has also filled your heart with faith to trust in the promise! So as we repent, turning away from our sin in preparation to meet our Savior, we also trust in his promises; promises of forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation.

And having trusted in those amazing promises, we get ready for Christmas by carrying out the third step—**Share the Knowledge of Salvation**. After 9 months of mute silence, Zechariah knew the truth: God keeps his promises. So when the time came, and his son was born, Zechariah obeyed the angel's command and named his miracle son, John.

And having repented of his lack of faith, and trusting in the promise, he couldn't help but share the good news, prophesying the words on which our Hymn of the Day, called the *Benedictus*, was written. There, Zechariah proclaimed the truth that he believed. That the one his son would prepare the people to meet, was the Savior of the world. As he sang, ***“You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God.”***

And friends, as we prepare our hearts for the coming of our Savior at Christmas, we have the same opportunity. Repenting of our sins, and trusting in the promise of our Savior born in Bethlehem, we now get to share that knowledge of salvation through Christ with others! Invite them to come and hear the good news in our worship services, as we aim to hit our goal of 300 invites to Christmas Eve again this year. Share the good news with your children and your family as you read the Christmas story, read your Advent devotional books, and

stand at the foot of the manger. Moved by faith, go and share the good news of the salvation of the world!

Whatever traditions and tasks you might complete once again this year to get yourself ready for Christmas, don't forget the most important ones: Turn. Trust. Tell.