Preparing the Way for Jesus Feb. 15, 2026
1 of 9 in *On the Way with Jesus: A Lenten Journey Through Luke* Luke 3:1-18

This coming Wednesday marks the start of a special season in the life of the worldwide church—*Lent*.

And today, we're kicking off a new sermon series at Cornerstone: *On the Way with Jesus: A Lenten Journey Through Luke.* Later in the service, you'll have a chance to make a Lent commitment—I'll explain more about that at the end of the message.

But at this time, I'd like to say a quick word about Lent itself, for those not familiar with it. Lent is a season of about six weeks leading up to Easter weekend. Modeled after Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, it's a time to slow down, reflect, repent, and realign our lives with his.

The commitments we make during Lent aren't about earning God's favor—they're about making space to be reshaped by God's grace as we walk with Jesus toward the cross, and ultimately, toward resurrection life.

Speaking of walking with Jesus, this year Cornerstone is stepping into the future God has for us. He's helped us discern four Guiding Priorities that will serve as signposts for our journey as a church over the next decade. You can see them up on the screen:

Guiding Priorities for Cornerstone's Next Chapter

1. Deeper and wider discipleship
2. Building bridges across difference
3. Joining God in the neighbourhood
4. Cornerstone Centre as a hub for community connection and belonging

For more info, visit www.cornerstonechurch.ca/guidingpriorities.

About a week ago, Lisa, our Executive Director of Operations, and I had the privilege of visiting a Cornerstone small group to chat about these priorities—and also just to connect more personally with the members of the group. We enjoyed such a rich and encouraging conversation with them.

In a church of over 1,000 people, it can be a challenge for the Executive Team to stay meaningfully connected across the congregation. One simple way to help bridge that gap is exactly what this group did: if you're in a small group, invite someone from the ET to visit one of your meetings. Whether it's Lisa, Pastor Jeremy or myself, we'd love to listen, learn, share, and pray with your group. Our schedules can get pretty full, so we may need to plan our visits well in advance, but within our limits we genuinely want to make ourselves available in this way. If your group is interested, please feel free to reach out to one of us.

We continue to seek God's direction for the specifics of Cornerstone's future, but Jesus is already calling us to live into these four priorities now— to let them increasingly shape our shared life and mission while we're *on the way* into the future God has in store for us.

Accordingly, Cornerstone's theme for 2026 is *On the Way*— and our new sermon series ties directly into it.

That's because "the way" is a central theme in Luke's gospel. In Luke, Jesus is constantly on the move—heading toward Jerusalem and his cross. Along the way, he shapes his followers through teaching moments, intentional ministry encounters, surprising acts of hospitality, and even loving enemies.

Lent invites us to join Jesus on a similar path. Every step toward Easter weekend reminds us that following Jesus is a journey that shapes us into people who reflect his welcoming love and radical grace to the world around us.

We begin our series in Luke chapter 3, with John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord's coming!" Before Jesus begins his public ministry, the way must be made ready.

In our text, preparing the way for Jesus unfolds in three stages—*initiation, response, and destination*—a pattern that still shapes how God works in our lives today. First, there's:

1. INITIATION: God speaks into a messy world—and into our messy lives. 4:40

Please follow along as I read verses 1-6:

> It was now the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, the Roman emperor. Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea; Herod Antipas was ruler over Galilee; his brother Philip was ruler over Iturea and Traconitis; Lysanias was ruler over Abilene.[2] Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests. At this time a message from God came to John son of Zechariah, who was living in the wilderness. [3] Then John went from place to place on both sides of the Jordan River, preaching that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. [4] Isaiah had spoken of John when he said,
>
> "He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,
> 'Prepare the way for the Lord's coming!
> Clear the road for him!
> [5] The valleys will be filled,
> and the mountains and hills made level.
> The curves will be straightened,
> and the rough places made smooth.
> [6] And then all people will see
> the salvation sent from God.'" [1]

Luke begins this part of his gospel by listing emperors, governors, local rulers, high priests.

This isn't background filler. It's actual history, and at the same time, it's theology.

Luke is showing us not just *that* God speaks, but *where* God speaks—right into the thick of a messy world: Rome is oppressive. The political and religious leaders are puppets of the empire. The people are

[1] Luke 3:1-6 (NLT)

fearful and weary, yearning for divine intervention. Tensions are high. Everyone knows things have to change, but no one agrees on how. Remind you at all of today's world?

It's into *that* kind of world that the word of God comes. As we read in verse 2:

> At this time a message from God came to John son of Zechariah, who was living in the wilderness. [2]

God's word comes—not in the palace, not in the temple—but in the wilderness. And not just any wilderness.

John preaches in the Jordan Valley, the lowest point on the earth. Traveling down from Jerusalem, you pass a sign marked "Sea Level" and then you continue the long descent toward the Dead Sea—the lowest place on the planet. It's here, in this deep valley, that God chooses to speak his message through John the Baptist.

The choice of place is deliberate. This is the same region where God met his people centuries earlier, as they emerged from the wilderness, standing on the edge of the Promised Land, ready to cross the Jordan River into a new life.

Now, John calls the people once again into the waters of the Jordan—this time in baptism. His message is clear: God is on the move. Israel is now at the threshold of another crossing—not a return to the past, but a new exodus—an infinitely greater deliverance.

From this place, John announces the prophet Isaiah's ancient promise: *Valleys filled. Mountains leveled. Crooked paths straightened. Rough places made smooth.*

This isn't about landscaping—it's about heart work. This is what it looks like when God speaks into a messy world and into our messy lives:

> He fills the valleys of our despair.
> He levels the mountains of our pride.
> He straightens our crooked ways.
> He smooths the jagged edges of our hearts.

Only then will we be ready to step fully into the new life God offers.

In the same way, Lent invites us to ask: What in my life needs to be raised up, leveled, straightened, or smoothed out so I can more fully enter into the life God offers me in Jesus? What pride in me resists God? What fear in me shrinks faith? What distractions keep my life shallow? What greed warps my priorities? What selfish habits choke out my love for God and others?

[2] Luke 3:2b (NLT)

The hope we cling to is this: God meets us where we are, even at our lowest points, speaking words of challenge and grace into our messy world, and into our messy lives. The question is: *Are we ready to hear what he has to say?*

That brings us to the second stage of preparing the way of the Lord. The stage of:

2. RESPONSE: We show our repentance in the way we live. 10:20

As the crowds come to John to be baptized—a public sign of their repentance—he meets them with words that are blunt and unsettling:

> **7** When the crowds came to John for baptism, he said, "You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? **8** Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don't just say to each other, 'We're safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.' That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. **9** Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire."
>
> **10** The crowds asked, "What should we do?"
>
> **11** John replied, "If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry."
>
> **12** Even corrupt tax collectors came to be baptized and asked, "Teacher, what should we do?"
>
> **13** He replied, "Collect no more taxes than the government requires."
>
> **14** "What should we do?" asked some soldiers.
>
> John replied, "Don't extort money or make false accusations. And be content with your pay."

John refuses to let repentance remain abstract. God's leveling work reaches everyone. The ax, says John, is already at the root of the tree, and only those whose lives show the fruit of repentance will escape God's righteous judgment.

God speaks, and his word demands a response. No longer could the people hide behind the fact that they were descendants of Abraham.

And neither can you and I ride on the spiritual coattails of our parents, relatives, or church tradition. Your faith can't be inherited like a family heirloom. God calls each of us to step into the waters ourselves, to reckon with our own hearts, and to live a life that reflects repentance and readiness. The rescue God promises is real—but it requires your own response, not someone else's.

When they hear John's words, the crowds start asking the right question—the best question.

They don't ask for clarification. They don't ask for a theological explanation. They ask for direction: "What should we do?"

John's answers are strikingly ordinary—and deeply demanding.

To the crowds: *Share your clothes. Share your food.*

To tax collectors: *Be fair. Stop taking advantage.*

To soldiers: *Don't abuse power. Don't extort. Be content.*

True repentance begins inwardly, but it always moves outwardly. Luke makes it very clear that repentance is not just feeling sorry inside. It's a visible way of life that reveals itself in how we treat others.

This is where Lent becomes uncomfortably practical. Repentance for you may look like:

- Sharing instead of accumulating
- Letting go instead of holding on
- Restraint instead of entitlement
- Kindness instead of indifference

So, the question becomes personal: If someone watched how I treat people, handle money, use influence, or speak about others, would repentance actually be visible?

And yet repentance is never merely personal. It shapes our shared life and mission as a church—how we relate to people unlike us, and how we show up for our city.

This connects directly to two of Cornerstone's Guiding Priorities for our next chapter: *building bridges across difference* and *joining God in the neighbourhood*. Because repentance isn't abstract—it takes shape in how we live, love, serve and bear witness together to the world around us.

As Luke reminds us, when God's way is made ready:

> "… all people will see
> the salvation sent from God." [3]

John the Baptist's message presses us gently but firmly: A repentant heart produces a changed life. We show our repentance in the way we live.

But John never lets the focus rest on moral effort alone. Because authentic repentance always leads us somewhere. Or better said, it leads us to *someone*. The third stage we see in our passage is that of:

3. DESTINATION: God leads us to Jesus.

Let's read verses 15-18:

[3] Luke 3:6 (NLT)

> **15** Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and they were eager to know whether John might be the Messiah.**16** John answered their questions by saying, "I baptize you with water; but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. **17** He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire." **18** John used many such warnings as he announced the Good News to the people.

The crowd begins to wonder: *Is John the Messiah?*

It would be easy enough for John to pretend that he is. He has influence. Momentum. Attention.

But John refuses the spotlight. "I baptize you with water," he says. "But one is coming who is greater than I am."

This is the heart of repentance: *it reorients us away from ourselves and toward Jesus.*

John points to Jesus as the one who brings the Holy Spirit and fire—not just comfort, but purification. Not just forgiveness, but transformation. John gives us the picture of a winnowing fork: the farmer tosses the wheat into the air, the wind blows away the chaff, so that what remains is clean and fruitful. That's what Jesus does—sifting and refining, removing what destroys life so that new life can flourish.

In this way, Luke holds together what we often separate: mercy and judgment; grace and accountability.

Judgment, John reminds us, is not the opposite of good news. It is part of it. Because God's justice names what destroys life—and refuses to let it have the final word.

And John is clear: *this work belongs to Jesus.* Not to us. Not to the preacher. Not to the church.

Our role is preparation. Jesus' role is transformation. Or, as Cornerstone's mission statement puts it, our role is to make space for Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus' role is to shape people together in God's love.

<u>Cornerstone's Mission Statement</u>
Making space for Jesus
to shape people together in God's love.

Lent is not about trying harder to be better people. It is about turning more fully toward Jesus—trusting him with our messy lives, our formation, our future.

This matters deeply as we move forward as a church "on the way." Our priorities, our plans, our practices only make sense if they keep pointing us beyond ourselves to Jesus, who alone transforms lives.

Conclusion: Lenten Commitments

Luke tells us that John's message— in all its honesty, urgency, mercy, and hope—was *good news.*

Why? Because repentance is not a dead end. It's a doorway. Lent invites us to walk through that doorway.

> To prepare our hearts for the celebration of the cross and empty tomb.
> To let our repentance shape our daily lives.
> And to fix our eyes on Jesus anew.

Again, Lent begins this coming Wednesday, February 15th. In preparation for the season, all of you are invited to make a Lent commitment today—not to prove your faith, but to practice it. Here's how it going to work.

- First, if everyone here in person can please make sure you have two copies of the Lent commitment card in hand.
- Those who are worshipping with us online, please go to the webpage you see on the screen at this time: www.cornerstonechurch.ca/lent. It has everything you need to make your Lent commitment online.
- Those here in person will also need a pen. If you don't have your own with you, pens can be found in the seat pouches. Also, ushers are moving throughout the worship hall with baskets of pens. If you need one, just raise your hand, and they'll get one to you.
- This year, Lent commitment Sunday fell on Family Day weekend, and that means we have an all-church service today—the kids are here with us! Let's hear it for them! Kids, you can make a Lent commitment too, if you like. Hopefully when you came in this morning, you received your printable. On the bottom, there's a tear-off section that you can use to make your Lent commitment. We also gave a special handout to parents and guardians to help you explain Lent to your kids.
- The front side of this card describes the basics of a Lent commitment. It says that Lent is a season of spiritual discipline and renewal where you GIVE UP something that tends to hinder your relationship with Jesus, and then you TAKE UP a spiritual practice that will help you make more space for Jesus.
- If you flip the card over to the back, at the top there's an invitation for you to prayerfully consider what to give up this Lent, as well as what to take up. In a few minutes, we'll give you some quiet moments to do just that.
- The key in making your commitment—and I can't stress this enough—is to *be as specific and detailed as you can*. The more general the commitment, the less helpful it will be.
    - For example, if my commitment is, "I will give up worrying, and think about Jesus more," is that specific enough, or is it too general? It's way too general, and probably unhelpful.
    - However, if my commitment is something like, "I will give up social media Monday through Friday, and in its place, I will take a prayer walk every evening before bed," that has some specificity to it, and it's likely to be much more doable and helpful. Make sense?
    - On the back of the card, you'll find some specific examples of what to give up, and what to take up, just to give you some ideas.
- Also on the back, at the bottom, you'll find some recommended devotional resources for Lent that you might want to consider in terms of what to take up. These resources are available for free. One is the Lectio 365 prayer app, which runs a fresh Lenten devotional series each year. The other two resources we recommend are available on the Bible app. One is called "Preparing

our Hearts for Easter" by Tim Keller and Redeemer Presbyterian Church, and the other is called "Lent for Everyone" by renowned New Testament scholar Tom Wright.
    - Of course, you are also most welcome to choose your own resources as the Lord leads.
- There's another thing I'd like to draw your attention to on the back of this card. Just below the lined section where you write in your name and Lent commitments, do you see the part that says, *A Space to Pray Along the Way*? That has to do with a series of special Thursday evening prayer gatherings that we're offering during Lent.
    - There's one on February 26, one on March 12, and one on March 26. Each gathering will take place from 7:00-8:30 p.m. upstairs in the Youth Lounge, and will include some acoustic worship time, reflection on Scripture, and guided spaces to pray for Cornerstone, for the wider community and world, as well as for each other.
    - These *A Space to Pray Along the Way* gatherings will be relaxed and casual—no need to register—just drop in. Come to any or all of the gatherings, and if you like, please join us for dinner beforehand at Open Table Thursday.
- At this time, we'll give you a few quiet moments to prayerfully consider, and then make your Lent commitment for Wednesday, February 18 through to Thursday, April 2nd.
- Those online can fill out the online form to make your commitment when you're ready. For those here in person, please fill out two copies of the card. One is for you to keep as a record of your commitment today. The other is for you to lay down at the foot of the cross here at the front of the stage. Kids, if you want to make a Lent commitment, you can come forward with your grown-up and place the tear-off part of your printable at the foot of the cross.
- We'll give a generous space of time now for you to make your Lent commitments, and when you're ready, from all across this worship hall, get up out of your seats, and bring your commitments to Jesus, laying them at the foot of his cross.