

Sunday Sermon: December 4, 2016

Sermon Text: Matthew 3:1-12

Sermon Theme: Be Prepared by Repenting and Believing.

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea ² and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” ³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

“A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

⁴ John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Are you ready for Christmas or is it sneaking up on you? You might have a list of all the things that you have to do to get ready for Christmas. Many already have their trees up and homes decorated with the Christmas decorations. But there is so much more to do, even though you may have started with the decorations there you might still have to hand the outdoor lights, get and wrap the gifts, attend Christmas parties, bake Christmas cookies, or get ready for the Christmas get-together. With so much to do, how could Christmas ever sneak up on someone?

Are you prepared for Christmas? I am not talking about getting the things checked off of the Christmas list, I am talking about preparing our hearts and minds for the wonderful news of the birth of our Savior. Are we focusing our hearts and minds on the important news of the Savior’s birth, or are we spending more time preparing for everything else?

It is so easy to fill our lives with the trimmings of Christmas which leave us empty and allow Christmas to sneak up on us, instead of filling our lives with the important thing which makes Christmas, Christmas. As we prepare our hearts and minds for Jesus to come, we hear the words of John the Baptist remind us to be prepared for Jesus to come by repenting and believing in him.

Many people, even Bible scholars, say that Jesus can’t be found in the Old Testament. If you are paging through the Old Testament you won’t find Jesus name, but even though God did not name the Messiah in the Old Testament, he left many pictures and symbols which serve as signposts to who that Messiah would be. Many of these signposts are so specific they can only be talking about the birth, life and death of Jesus.

God gave clear prophecies which pointed to Jesus, but he also gave clear prophecies about a herald who would announce that the Messiah was coming. That herald was John the Baptist.

From the time the angel Gabriel announced his birth to his father Zecharias, it was clear that John the Baptist’s purpose, his message and ministry, would be special. **Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. ¹⁶ Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ 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.” (Luke 1:13-17)**

As Gabriel spoke with Zecharias he referenced the Old Testament prophecy from Malachi. **“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty. (Mal 3:1)** And then later, **“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah” (Mal 4:5).** This prophecy

pointed the people to look for someone who would look and act differently from the other prophets. They were to listen for someone who preached with the power and authority of a true prophet, through whose preaching the Holy Spirit would stir hearts and minds in faith. This would be the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah.

John the Baptist was this messenger. He didn't look, act, or sound like the other prophets of his day. He lived, acted, and dressed much more like the prophets of old. His message to repent was also a message that had not been heard for many years.

John served a very special job as the forerunner of the Messiah. He was to prepare the hearts and minds of the people for Jesus to come. This was a very important job in Bible times. There were no 24 hour news networks that would proclaim the news that was going on in the world. The people of a nation might hear that the nation was at war and then would sit for a long time before they would ever hear what had happened in that war. However, if there was something very special that had happened, good news, a victory over a nation, or a new king had been crowned the king would send word throughout his nation. Many times he himself would travel throughout his land as proof that the news was true. There was still a problem, how do you let people know that the king is coming with great news? How do you get the people ready for the king when he comes through town?

The solution was to send runners before the king (forerunners) to get the people ready for his coming. These runners would go to all the villages and towns proclaiming as loudly as they could that the king was coming and the people should drop what they are doing and get ready to see and hear him. Word would then spread pretty quickly from one person to another. Still, the forerunner, the herald, was very important to proclaim the news to the people so they could prepare themselves.

John was this forerunner, this herald. Although being this herald for Jesus was special, even prophesied, John's message and ministry was only temporary, the message of the Messiah was greater. **After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." The people were to repent, to prepare the way because the King was here.**

His message to the people was foretold by Isaiah, **"Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."**

Think for a moment about a portion of the Las Vegas area that was desert 20 years ago, before the development was built. It was not a place that a family would have gone for an afternoon because it was still wild and unruly. There was no water, there was cactus and scrub, walking in that area could have put you in danger of being bitten or stung by any number of animals or insects. If you got lost there, it would not be long before the heat of the sun would have sapped your strength and left you helpless. Yet, today, that same location is a beautiful park. There is grass, trees and walking paths. There are shelters and places to sit with shade. There are water fountains and play areas. The place has gone from unruly to civilized, from untamed to tame.

The human heart is a wild and unruly place. It is an uncivilized and untamed, so corrupt and lawless, it is dangerous to go there. Our hearts are a dangerous wilderness because they are so full of sin. While on the outside we can say and do all the right things that make us look upstanding and good, we realize our hearts reflect our selfish attitudes and feelings that our outward actions may not. We know the many times that we have been praised for doing something good, when in fact we have done it only for the praise, only for the recognition. We recognize that while people may have one view of who we are, they don't see our struggles with sexual sins, with greediness, with pride or arrogance.

Even though people can't see the sin in our hearts, our God still can. He knows that while our outward appearance may look so good, the wilderness of our hearts needs to be changed. The mountains of sin need to be leveled, the brambles and thorns of temptations need to be removed, the windy roads that have led to sin and destruction must be remade into the straight path that lead to God. This new heart needs a complete overhaul, it needs to be completely changed into the image of our Savior.

John called out to the people of Jesus' day who had forgotten about their Savior, "Sinner, Repent!"

Repentance is not just saying we are sorry. Yes, we often feel sorrow over our sin, but if we don't do anything about those sins it is like the child that says to his or her parents, "Yes, Mom and Dad, I feel bad this room is dirty. I know you told me to pick it up, but it's too dirty and I can never do anything about it, so I will just leave it the way it is."

Repentance goes deeper than merely sorrow or guilt over sin. As the Holy Spirit does his work, the believer see their sins, they feel sorrow over these because they realize that they have sinned against God. They look to their Savior for the forgiveness that only he can give, they believe that this Messiah from sin can and does exactly what he says he does. He forgives fully and freely the sins of his people. Because of that forgiveness we are motivated to turn from our sin and to change our sinful life out of thanks to our Savior.

Our hearts are prepared to meet our Savior when we not only repent of our sins, but believe that this Messiah, this Savior, has forgiven those sins now and forever. This is making the path in the sinful heart straight, or taming that unruly wilderness of sin which is inside of us.

How are we preparing our hearts and minds to meet our Savior? Amid all the running, have we taken the time to sit and have a devotion centered on the real reason for Christmas? Have we used an Advent calendar to show us those prophecies that point our hearts to the babe of Bethlehem? Have we taken a moment to confess our sins and repent of them believing that Christmas brings joy because it brings a Savior from sin.

Jesus says in Matthew, **“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.”** John calls us to prepare ourselves by repenting and believing, Jesus invites us to do this as well. He wants us to be free of the burden of sin that so often sits on our hearts. He wants to free us from the guilt of past sins.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, at this time of year we are preparing for so many extras. We have so much on our plate that Advent preparation may not come to the forefront of our minds. Be prepared to meet the Messiah and Savior this year. Repent and believe that this is your Savior who has come to set you free from your sins. **Amen.**