

“Prepare Your Hearts”

Matthew 3:1-12

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In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

During the season of Advent, we wait. We wait for the presents that are arriving. We wait for the time off from school. We wait for the vacation days we

will spend. We wait for families to arrive or we wait for airplanes to take us to family. We wait for Christmas, the day we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the entering of God into our world, the story of Immanuel, God with us. Our songs are about waiting. Our liturgy is about getting ready. Advent is about the active preparation before the arrival of God into our world.

Which is why we are looking at John the Baptist this Sunday. John is the epitome of prepared. Like a doomsday survivalist, John has gone off the grid, moved to the wilderness. He has completely disconnected from the corrupt systems of his day. He has stopped buying clothes from companies that pay unfair wages and stopped eating processed food. John is prepared. And he wants to prepare others. So he uses his fiery, doom and gloom, preaching to tell people to “Prepare!”, which is attracting the masses. John was *so prepared* for the coming of the Messiah and the reign of God that would follow that he thought he knew exactly how it would happen and who would be in and who would be out.

But as we all know, humans make mistakes even when they are trying their best. And John was trying his best. Called from birth for this vocation, John had expectations about what God’s world should look like. So John was living fully into his calling but at the same time was still human and made mistakes. He may have even overstepped his calling. John was laying the groundwork for God to come by telling people to repent and to prepare the way. But he may have let his passion and calling go to his head and started judging who would be in and who would be out, determining the worthiness of individuals instead of focusing on preparation.

In the verses following our text for today, Jesus shows up to John and John immediately knows that this is the Lamb of God, the one he prepared the way for. But then Jesus has John baptize him instead of John being baptized. John probably wondered why the Lamb of God would need a cleansing baptism from his sins... But I imagine when the clouds parted and the Holy Spirit fell on Jesus that John was able to put aside this little difference.

However, Jesus continues on his ministry, and he is eating and drinking with all the wrong people. He is touching lepers and healing them! He is having dinner with prostitutes and tax collectors! He is engaging with the temple system and engaging fully with society instead of completely condemning it. So John sends

messengers to Jesus to ask “Are you really the messiah who was prophesied about?” And Jesus says, “Look around. People are healed and fed and cared for. Is this not God’s kingdom? Is this not the vision Isaiah gives us?”

Maybe, just maybe, John had been wrong about what this world was going to look like. Perhaps the radical reordering of our world through the incarnation of Jesus, surprised even John who was its lead hype man. And I really think we can learn something from John here. He realizes that while he was telling everyone else to repent and prepare the way that he may have forgotten to do it himself. Now he begins to prepare his own heart for God’s amazing kingdom.

So listen to John this morning and follow his example. Repent and prepare your hearts for the loving arrival of our God. Are you focusing on the troublemakers in your family? Are you constantly comparing yourself to your neighbors? Are you maintaining the status quo in our culture that benefits some at the expense of others? Use John as our example. Stop looking outward for preparation. Do not wait for others to change, but actively look inward and focus on what you can control. Join in the daily advent devotionals. Practice this generous love by signing up to buy a present for our Christmas families. Prepare yourself this advent season. Prepare your heart to receive love and prepare your mind to share it with a broken world.

John was right about one thing in regards to Jesus’ coming. Jesus is *reordering our entire world*. But it is not up to John or us to decide what that order will be, to look around and say “you are in” or “you are out.” If we look at the vision from Isaiah of God’s peaceable kingdom, which we heard read during the candle lighting this morning, we see that both predator and prey lie down next to each other. And since we are human, we are sometimes the predator and sometimes the prey. Like John who is sometimes the amazing prophet and at other times the person creating dividing walls. So thank God that all sides of us are loved in God’s kingdom. This vision we are waiting for is bigger and better than anything we could hope or imagine. It is so immense and expansive that it includes us and it includes our enemies. It is a love that does not discriminate and fights to bring all into its warmth.

So John calls us this advent to prepare. Prepare our hearts to receive the love of God and prepare our bodies to share that love with all. Yes, all. Are we prepared

for that kind of love? Are we prepared to receive it? Are prepared to see it in others? Prepare the way for the kingdom of God comes near. Prepare.