

Matthew 24:36-44

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 Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, and 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; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and 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.”*

Preparing Us for the Lord - December 4, 2022

Matthew 3:1-12

Advent is the season of Christian “preparation.” We are preparing for the birthday of Jesus, our Lord and Savior, who entered the world in the same way all of us have. He was born. He had a human mother.

I like the Oxford Dictionary’s definition of preparation: something done to get ready for an event or undertaking. I like it because it pinpoints the problem with Advent and the entire Christmas season. The world’s secular preparation for Christmas is getting ready for an event. Indeed, that is obvious. Jesus is at the center of events. His birth on Christmas is a wonderful reason to celebrate. We gather with family and friends. We throw parties, we exchange gifts. We have a good time. Jesus Christ is the greatest gift of all time. Therefore, celebrations are very much in order.

But there is religious part to our understanding of preparation. As Christians, we are also getting ready to be part of an undertaking.

An undertaking. A journey. A project. Something that will continue long after the Christmas tree is put away and the last chunk of fruitcake is swallowed. For Christians, Jesus is not just a one-and-done happening. Jesus instead marks a complete upheaval in the way we look at life and live life day to day. Jesus is not just an event. Rather Jesus is an undertaking.

By choosing to make Jesus a daily part of our lives, we are truly making a permanent change in how we live. Christmas is not a holiday in and of itself. Sure we may have a good time, but the reason we have a good time is not just about seeing our families and enjoying the gifts. No we are celebrating because Jesus offers a genuine alternative to how most people view and conduct their lives and because of that, we should be truly happy for ourselves and for the world.

Today’s scripture speaks of the ministry of John the Baptizer. John’s work started before that of Jesus and for a time, their ministries overlapped. But from the start, John told his listeners that his role was to serve as a kind of living preview pointing people toward Jesus. Think of John as a movie trailer we see in theaters, urging us to see the motion picture in a few weeks. John’s purpose was to pique our interest for the next phase.

Listen to how John caught the attention of his audience: First, he dressed differently, some might say oddly. Matthew tells us, “Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.” That was not standard Jewish clothing nor the standard Jewish diet of the times. John is actually one of the few people we meet in scripture whose personal

appearance is described. Why? Because when the Scriptures describe someone's appearance, it is typically done with reference to prophets. Biblical prophets had a habit of dressing strangely precisely to call attention to themselves. Of course the prophet Jeremiah apparently walked around naked for several years — that undoubtedly caught some people's attention!

So John dressed differently precisely because he wanted his listeners to think of him as a preacher doing something new, different, and even offensive. For example, John had no problem offending the Jewish religious leaders of the day. He said, ““You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor.’” John was not at all afraid to call out the rich, the powerful, the leaders of the establishment. That, of course, is what got him killed. John dared criticize the king a bit too often and John's head ended up on a serving platter.

But John's problem back then remains our problem today. Even at Christmastime, the great unasked question is whether we actually need Jesus Christ in the world and in our lives.

Hey, Christmas is a good excuse to party, isn't it? I mean isn't it great that we have a whole week to party in between Christmas and New Year's? Boy, that Christmas sure comes at a great time.

Yet, while Christmas is certainly convenient for a party schedule, it still begs the question of the point or necessity of Jesus in the first place.

We proclaim Jesus as our Lord and Savior every week. However, the fundamental question is whether we truly feel we need a Lord and Savior at all? Do we need God in our lives or not?

Friends, if we don't believe in our hearts that we need a Lord and Savior, then the message and work of Jesus is meaningless. Now John tried to persuade his listeners that they needed to be saved and that Jesus was going to be the one to do it. John made his case mostly by threatening the people. He would say, “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” In other words, John told those who were not “bearing good fruit” that bad things were going to happen to them. Their solution, according to John, was to get themselves right with God by finding the Savior and doing what he would tell them to do.

Now as we all know as parents and workers, threats only work if you feel threatened. Threaten a child with punishment for disobedience but not enforcing it when the child actually disobeys and guess what? The kid will start to ignore you. At what point did you realize various work rules would never

actually be enforced so you ignored them? At what point after coming to New Jersey that while the posted speed limit may be 65 on the Turnpike, the real speed limit is closer to 80?

John's approach was to get his listeners to repent, to change their lives permanently, or face the eternal consequences from a wrathful God. Obviously, John enjoyed some measure of success because there were many of his followers who switched to following Jesus later on. Threatening people to prepare them for the Lord does work sometimes.

But in our day, I'm not sure that threatening people into getting saved by forecasting eternity in hell is terribly useful or successful in the long run. Yes, hellfire and brimstone preaching is still around in the 21st century. However, such preachers are typically ignored or laughed at by most. I mean, how many of you would stick around if all I did was preach damnation and horrible punishments at the hand of a wrathful God? It's not something we simply inclined to believe. If indeed I preached judgement and wrath, it is easy enough to find a church that is not into condemnation and punishment. We've seen time and again that countries that are run by threats and fear will eventually fail. The People will as a group stop obeying and there just aren't enough enforcers to go around.

Nonetheless, John raised the issue for his listeners which we still must face today. Do we need God in our lives or can we simply go it alone?

Now because you're listening to me, at least of part of you is willing to consider the idea of God and the possibility of having a relationship with God, however you understand God to be. We all know of many people, probably most of our friends and families, who may say they believe in some kind of "higher power" but are very reluctant to name what it is or what it does.

Friends, the reason I preach to you is not to hear myself talk, but to be to you what John was to his listeners so long ago. Just as John did, I am here to prepare you for the Lord.

Many churches make the mistake of believing the pastor is the one who brings people to Jesus Christ. I preach the message. I am visible in the community. I do all the "nice things" on behalf of the congregation. Your role is to pay me to be nice and criticize me when I mess up.

I'm being facetious, of course. I don't feel that way about you, the people of Collingswood Church. Unfortunately, what many Christians do feel is that once they believe they are saved, that they have a relationship with God in Jesus Christ, their work is finished.

If so, they are missing the point. I am not the one, I repeat, I am not the one whose job it is to win people to Jesus Christ. It is not my job to justify Jesus to the world. It is not my job to explain why Christmas is actually a religious holiday, not an excuse to party.

It is not my job, friends. But it is yours.

My job is just like John's: I am here to equip you to do the real work of spreading the good news of Jesus Christ in whatever way you believe works. In John's day, threatening people with the wrath of God may well have been useful. But is certainly not the only way.

No. To spread the good news of Jesus, the first and most important thing is for you to believe that the good news of Jesus is truly good — for you! The message is not just “come here because the people are friendly or the music is nice.” No. The message is that we live our lives and look at our lives differently because of Jesus Christ and because of him, our lives are decidedly better.

Now you don't have to actually say those words. You don't have to share them with people like you would share your opinion of a movie or restaurant. All you have to do to show Jesus makes a difference in your life is to live like Jesus makes a difference. We don't have to talk like Jesus, all we have to do is love one another the same way Jesus loves us. I guarantee that if we dare be like Jesus to the world, the world will take notice and ask us why.

And that is where we come together with John. Our goal is the same as John's goal: we want people to see for themselves that following Jesus by living as he lived is truly the best decision we can make, ever. It really doesn't matter why someone decides to follow Jesus, it only matters that once they make the decision, they do their best to make that decision a reality.

As we approach Christmas, we obviously have a lot of things to do to prepare for the celebrations, gatherings, and fun. There's nothing wrong with that. But as Christians, we also need to prepare ourselves to answer the question why we are following Jesus ourselves. What is it about him and his way that changes our lives for the better. Prepare yourself to answer that question.

I know that once you are prepare yourself to explain your faith to another person, to explain why you act as Jesus acts and love as Jesus loves, you won't have to worry about finding someone to share it with.

Instead, friends, they will come to you.

Be prepared!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.