

FOCUS: The Good News is that even as we await celebrating the birth of the Christ Child, we await with patience the coming again of our Lord and Savior. (Second in a series)

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”¹ These are the words of the last great prophet, and one of my favorite Biblical figures, John the Baptist. John has been roaming around the Judean countryside, calling on the people to repent from their sins and return to the Lord, and now he calls on them to prepare for the coming of the Lord. What a sight it must have been, watching this strange guy preach about repenting and preparing for the Lord as he roamed the territory wearing a camel hair coat and enjoying a lunch of locusts and wild honey. The crowds around him were as much from curiosity as anything else. John carried forth a rather simple and straightforward message—prepare yourselves for something great.

Countless followers from Jerusalem and all of Judea joined John, the last of the great prophets. From near and far, people came to hear him preach a message of promise and hope—albeit one that had a rather sharp edge to it. John’s message was really quite simple. Repent for your sins and get yourselves ready, because the Lord is coming. Do not pass “Go.” Do not collect \$200. Come, repent, and be baptized. People from all walks of life and backgrounds were coming to hear what this strange prophet had to say.

John got a lot of attention—some good and some bad. We will hear next week that he is in jail, but today, he is a free man preaching a tough message. John’s message was heard—and responded to—by Jews and Gentiles alike. John was reaching out to *all* people to get them to repent and prepare for the coming of the Lord. This is a common theme in Matthew’s gospel, and we’ll come back to that on another Sunday. But for today, we need to keep our focus on the message John has brought to the people—prepare, repent, and be baptized.

We should note here, if only as a bookmark for future reference, that John’s preaching described here comes just before the start of the public ministry of Jesus, and not as a precursor to his birth. Also, don’t think that baptism is strictly a Christian activity. In Judaism, as well as other non-Christian beliefs, ritual washing—baptism—was common. For example, it was common in the Essene community, of which many believe John the Baptist was a member, for those who joined to be baptized as a sign of joining in the community. The Pharisees and temple priests also washed ritually as a sign of purification. And, in some Jewish communities, Gentile converts, particularly women, were baptized as part of the conversion process. So, John’s call to repent and be baptized would not seem out of character.

However, to tell of one who was to come who would baptize “with the Holy Spirit and fire” was different. To proclaim a message that says, “Wait a minute! You need to repent and be baptized, but it doesn’t end there. You need to be prepared for the One who is to come. Get yourself ready for the One of whom Isaiah speaks.” Now is the time, but not yet. What a powerful message.

God has a plan. While that plan isn’t clear to us, and in some ways, we only see the plan as it unfolds and we look back upon it. One prophet of the Lord is followed by another. Isaiah proclaims the coming of one from the “root of Jesse” who will judge with

¹ Matthew 3:3b (NRSV)

righteousness. Isaiah foretells the coming of one who will judge the meek and lowly as well as the high and mighty. Life will change when the One comes. It will be a radical change, when animals who are natural enemies will, instead of killing one another, will rest peacefully together. Peoples from many nations will come together in peace, rather than face off in conflict. The day will come when all the peoples of the earth will hear and see the One who is to come, and all nations will come together. The day of the Lord is at hand. The time is now, but not yet.

John confronts the Sadducees and Pharisees in particular. As we know from previous Sundays in which we have seen these fine examples of how *not* to act, the Sadducees and Pharisees aren't great friends of John, nor will they be of Jesus. John challenges them not to simply come and repent for show, but to do so with honesty and truth in their hearts. John reminds them that God is all-powerful, and should God choose to do so, God could create more Chosen People from inanimate objects as well as Gentiles. Therefore, those who are insincere need not repent just to look good. Repent, however, in order to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

The time now is a time of preparation. We are approaching the celebration of the Nativity of our Lord even as we approach the second coming of Christ. While we wait for the coming of a helpless infant, one born of common parents in an uncommon birthing place, we hear of the coming of a powerful Savior who is coming to fulfill the promise and to gather the people together. While we wait for a fresh-faced infant to sleep softly in a manger, we await the return of the One who was nailed to the cross and had a spear thrust into his side.

Now we gaze at the Advent wreath, and see that two candles are lit and burning down. The candles remind us that we are in a time of preparation and waiting. They also remind us that we are not yet ready to celebrate the coming of the Christ Child. As we look past the Advent wreath, we see the cross. The cross is empty, reminding us that while Jesus died upon the cross for us and for our salvation, we await his coming again to judge the living and the dead—to clear his threshing floor and gather the wheat into the storehouse. The Lord Jesus Christ will indeed come, but not yet.

While we wait for Christ to come again, we live and gather as a community of faith. As we were commanded, we baptize all people in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We live and gather as a united community of men and women from a wide range of nations and experiences. We come to the Table to receive the precious Body and Blood of our dear Lord Jesus Christ as a sign of God's love—God's grace—for us. We welcome one another—American and Swede, Salvadoran and Korean, Russian and Chinese—just as Christ welcomed us, for the glory of God.

Now is the time to prepare for the coming of the Lord. It is not yet time to end our vigil for the One who is to come. The One to come will indeed come. Let us make ourselves ready.