

Preparing for Christ

Matthew 3:1–12

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

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘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 comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and 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.”

If John the Baptist thought the spiritual condition of people in Israel in his time was challenging, imagine what he’d think if he were preaching in the spiritual wilderness of 21st century United States. We have the whole menu of false religions from Islam to Mormons, a huge segment of the population practices no religion, and a significant portion of Christian churches deny clear Bible teachings, things like justification by faith alone and the resurrection of the body. It is specifically because of these challenges that this account of John the Baptist continues to contain an important message for the Church. Today, more than ever, WE need to prepare the pathway for

Christ.

Our Gospel deals with three important aspects of preparing Christ’s path that are still very applicable to our lives and the Church today. First, the central word in John the Baptist’s preaching that prepared Christ’s path was *repent*. Just as Lent is a season of preparation and spiritual refreshment for Christians, so too is Advent. It is a time to quit kidding ourselves about how good and holy we’re becoming. We need to honestly recognize OUR sins—in thought, word, and deed—and repent. John the Baptist did not sugarcoat his condemnation of sinners. He told people plain and simple the deep problem they were in without the grace of God. *Repent* does not mean just being sorry for our sins, but it also demands faith, believing in God’s grace to forgive sins because of Christ’s saving work. Without the Holy Spirit working the miracle of faith, being sorry for sin is a dead end. With his mention of the kingdom of the heavens, John is pointing his hearers to God’s gracious work in Jesus to bring God’s reign back to this sinful earth. Just as John called his hearers to repent, Advent is a special time for US to repent and to call the unbelieving world to repent.

Three simple words that most people, including many Christians, find difficult to say are “I am sorry.” When we sin against God or someone else, we would rather yell, scream, and argue than tell God or someone else, “I’m sorry.” Evidence of repentance, of faith worked by the Holy Spirit, which we see in our Gospel, is when the people coming to John and being baptized confess their sins. Advent is a time for us to be honest with God and one another by confessing our wrongs, our sin. Confession of sin is the rhythm of life for a Christian. Advent is a time to make sure that we are back in that rhythm of confessing our sins to God and one another.

The second aspect to preparing Christ’s path that’s revealed in this Gospel is to live in your baptismal grace. Jews did many ritual washings seeking purity from their sins. They used washing pools with steps where you could walk down into the water for ritual cleansing. John’s Baptism was different; it was a one-time washing that brought forgiveness.

We continue to prepare the way for Christ in this Advent season as we live in our baptismal grace and treasure it. John the Baptist said, “He who is coming after me is mightier than I. . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (v 11). As amazing as John the Baptist was with his preaching and Baptism, you have received the teaching and

Baptism of Jesus. When you were baptized, you received the Holy Spirit, who united you with all the saving work of Christ: his entire obedient life, his death as a payment for sin, and his resurrection victory! So, an important aspect of preparing Christ's path is living in this baptismal grace, claiming and treasuring it, living in its power and peace. Advent is a time to get back to the spiritual basics, and Baptism is one of those spiritual foundations in our lives.

Our Gospel reveals a third aspect to preparing Christ's path. John says, "Bear the fruit of repentance!" (v 8). This command sounds rather challenging. John continues with a strong word of judgment: "Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (v 10). If we are sinners, then how can poor trees like us produce good fruit? The Holy Spirit works repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, so it is not us who will produce good fruit, but the Holy Spirit whom we have received in Baptism when we were united with Christ, who does them. The fruit we cannot produce by nature—such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—the Holy Spirit can and will produce in us and through us. We prepare Christ's path by bearing the fruit of faith for the world to see, fruit miraculously produced not by us, but by the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist must have been overwhelmed with his task—so much to do to prepare Galilee and Judea for Christ's coming. We may feel overwhelmed with our mission. But it all starts within each of us by repenting and confessing our sins, living in our baptismal grace, and bearing the fruit of repentance worked by the Holy Spirit. We, in turn, want others to experience the undeserved love of God in Christ that we already have in these special days of Advent. We call them to repent and confess their sins, to be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit, and to bear the fruit of repentance the Holy Spirit produces. Prepare Christ's path—the path to YOUR heart and to the hearts of OTHERS. Amen.

Philip Tesch
 December 4, 2016
 North Highlands, California