



## PREPARE

Matthew 3:1-12

December 8, 2019, MorningSong Worship

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A few weeks ago, I asked an adult Sunday School class what they do after Thanksgiving to prepare for Christmas. I am sure the list will sound as familiar to you as it did to me:

Climb up into the attic to retrieve the decorations,  
make a gift list,  
get your Christmas card picture taken,  
cut down the Christmas tree,  
hit the gym to work off the calories in advance for all,  
the cooking, cooking and more cooking,  
and finally,  
call the credit card company to increase the limit to pay for it all!

There is an awful lot of work that goes into preparing for Christmas, though I am not exactly sure this is what Matthew had in mind when he quoted Isaiah, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" Instead, Matthew believed John the Baptizer showed us the way and the most striking thing about this suggestion for us today is the stridency of John's rhetoric.

John talks about fire, axes, and winnowing forks. That hardly seems the tone we want to set for ourselves and our family, to prepare for the Prince of *Peace*, but his role is critical, essential.

In last week's scripture, Jesus told us to stay awake, awake to his presence, awake to what he has to offer, but to do so, in this age that deadens our spiritual senses, is near impossible! It was even very challenging in Jesus' time...enter John the Baptizer. His job is to make us ready.

He was a charismatic outdoorsman who was outspoken and bold because he wanted people to wake up to what was coming. He was the original street preacher, breathing fire and brimstone because he was so desperate to be absolutely sure

we were thoroughly prepared that he is willing to be the finger nails on the chalkboard of our souls – if that's what it takes. It is too important to take the soft, gentle approach.

John teaches us to prepare for the arrival of the bridegroom, but not through cookies and Christmas trees. Instead, John tells us it is repentance that gets us ready, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

You remember Einstein's quote, "Insanity is doing the same thing, over and over again, but expecting different results." All of us have fallen into the trap of wanting things to get better – whether it is the relationships with our family, a change in our lifestyle, or the hope for a better paying job. Perhaps we have complained for years, hoping for change, but have never really done anything about it.

John the Baptist is the drill sergeant for your spiritual soul, to shock you into being a better you. He commands us to repentance, which really means turning away from simply being sorry or bemoaning your problems and failings and doing something about it!

The first step is baptism. A baptism that cleanses as well as refreshes. It is a baptism of forgiveness for the remission of sins. Before we can receive the Lord, we need a spiritual cleanse. It is something like preparing for a marathon (or so I am told). Before you can do any real, intense training, you need to get the junk food out of your system.

The repentance is *that* cleanse and our sins are the junk food clogging up our heart and our soul, reducing our capacity to know love, joy, and hope.

But John suspected that some of those people coming for baptism wanted just a surface washing, just enough repentance to ease their guilt without really changing anything. And that is when he levels

up his rhetoric, (most famously, “You brood of vipers!”) because it is just too important.

Because what is coming is too profound and incredible to not do everything we absolutely can to prepare.

What Matthew has done in his gospel is an INCREDIBLE GENIUS stroke of writing, an amazing juxtaposition. In referring to John as the fulfillment of the prophecy from Isaiah he has turned John from a harbinger and gloom and doom into a promise of supreme hope and joy. To understand how, we must look at the times in which Isaiah wrote.

The Israelites were living in exile. They had been defeated by the Babylonian empire and were forced to abandon the Promise Land and relocate in Babylon. They had spent a few generations there and they were a broken people, filled with deep, soul-crushing anguish. Many of you have known this despair through deep and punishing loss. The Israelites knew it as an entire people for over a generation. And that takes its toll.

A few quotes from Lamentations written during this era will help convey the depth of their despair,

*He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead.*

*My groans are many and my heart is faint.*

*He dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help.*

Amid their grief, Isaiah offers a prophecy, but first these soothing words from God, “Comfort, O Comfort my people.” When people know nothing but despair, even a few simple words of compassion can literally be the difference between life and death. Martha Swann, who passed this week, knew this well.

What was so remarkable about our dear Martha Swann was that no matter how far bent her back was, her spirit was always strong and upright. And she would climb your steps, write that note, or deliver pimento cheese, or anything as a way to be a good neighbor. For many people, those little notes came at hard times and it really made a

difference, a wondrous and amazing difference when one you loved had been lost from this earth. She offered that Comfort, O that blessed Comfort, just as God promised it for Israel.

But this prophecy will do more than soothe. It offers THE PROMISE that Israel hoped for, ached for, for so long.

*In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.*

*Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

John comes with words of fear and repentance but the quote from Isaiah is about the restoration of Israel. It is an act of great liberation returning the Jews to Israel through making a way in the desert. To get back home required either a long detour or a short cut through the treacherous wilderness.

For those of you who loved Seinfeld, you may remember Kramer’s “luxury lane”. He decided to adopt a highway, but instead of picking up the trash he repainted the lanes turning four lanes into two extra-wide lanes, so that while driving on that busy highway you could feel like a king. That is what God is doing! The Lord is making a double-wide lane right through the wilderness! It will be an easy path without winding twisting turns, without deep valleys or high mountains. It will be a straight highway, a superhighway.

This means the “voice of one crying out in the wilderness” that Isaiah is talking about is definitively not the voice of condemnation, or even a lone, stern voice of righteousness; it is a voice that calls us out of the wilderness of life to find restoration and hope and peace.

It is the voice that calls us HOME.

For Israel, that home was returning to the Promised Land. Our home will be found in the one

who is coming, that innocent infant babe born so long ago. John desperately wants us to be ready for his coming. The good news is God has done all the heavy lifting; all we need to do to prepare for his arrival is to repent.

This summer, I learned the hard way what “turning around” means for Advent. Many of you have heard about my Grand Canyon hike and my critical error, at the last minute, of buying nine extra pounds of food, including three pounds of candy the night before.

Because of this, I was weighed down; that hot sun sucked even more life and energy from my body. As a result of adding something extra to my pack, I spent a half day in the canyon recovering from heat exhaustion.

But the purpose of my trip was not to satisfy my sweet tooth, it was to relish the beauty of God’s creation, but I lost a half day.

The purpose of Advent, of Christmas, is not to buy presents and eat endless treats. Some of that is perfectly fine, but everyone has a different tolerance level. A pack of starburst on my trip would have been just right. John’s job is to make sure we don’t overpack our lives and then fail to make our destination.

To repent in Advent is to change your patterns in December, so that you don’t miss the mystery of a shining star, a stable, wisemen, angels, and shepherds – and that you are not so exhausted when the child is born that you sleep through it all.

For this child will be our way. Our way through the desert of a life that has become parched for soul-nourishing love and things of deep and profound meaning.

If we walk to the manger this Advent, he will carve out of this desert of December a more wonderful, mystical, and amazing experience than we could ever imagine for ourselves. It will take prayer, and solitude, and service, and openness, and honesty, and devotion and perseverance. But if we trust him, he will forge that superhighway for

our souls, that will take us straight home, home to God.