

*Sermon for 2 Advent, Year A  
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Advent is the season in which we prepare for the coming of the Messiah. We prepare for him to come as an infant in the manger. But we also prepare for his coming in great power and glory to judge the world. And so Advent is the season of John the Baptizer.

John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, is the forerunner. St. Matthew says he is the one that Isaiah prophesied, the “one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” That prophesy is from the fortieth chapter of Isaiah, the one that begins, “Comfort, comfort my people!” It is good news! The Lord is coming to save his people! “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

The only question is: Are you ready for the kingdom of heaven? Remember that heaven is where God’s will is done perfectly. And so John’s message is a stern one. If the kingdom of heaven is at hand, he says, then you had better get moving in the other direction. “Repent!” Literally, turn around and go the opposite direction. Abandon your sin and disobedience! Do it now, because pretty soon it will be too late.

John carries on a bustling ministry of baptism. People who believe his message confess their sins and are ritually cleansed of them in the waters of the Jordan River. All of this is in preparation for the coming of the Messiah and the day of the Lord. These people are getting ready, which is what we should be doing, as well. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand! Last week, we heard Jesus words: “Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” “Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

There is an urgency to all this. There is no time to spare. You can’t just wait for a good time to get on with the business of repentance and getting ready to meet Jesus. He could come tomorrow! You must be ready. There may be mercy for those who bear little fruit, but there will be none for those who bear no good fruit. So make a straight path for the Lord in your heart, mind, and soul. And start yesterday!

St. John the Baptist reminds us that we cannot simply go through the motions of obedience. We cannot assume that ritual is all we need. The Pharisees and Sadducees who came to him for baptism were part of sects which depended on ritual. The Pharisees kept the letter of the moral law, and the Sadducees were the party that served the ritual of the temple sacrifices. And it seems that they came to

John for baptism just to hedge their bets. Here was another ritual that promised to keep you in the good graces of the Lord.

But John won't let them get away with that. It doesn't say that he didn't baptize them. But he made sure everyone knew that his baptism had to be a sign of something that was happening internally and spiritually. And so he says that line that all good pastors have wanted to say at one time or another: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit that befits repentance," he says. In other words, it's not just about ritual, and it's not just about behavior. It's about a real change of heart that then changes your behavior and your attitude. Repentance changes the whole person, or it isn't repentance.

You see, there is a reason the world hates our Lord and hates those who follow him. The good and glorious news of the coming of Jesus Christ does not appear as good news to those who have not fitted themselves for it. The coming of the judge is not a happy occasion for those who haven't prepared to meet him. The one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit is the same one who baptizes with fire. And anything that is not pure will be burnt away. What terrifying news to those who are entirely made up of impurities. "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

So I have two questions for you about this. First, are you bearing good fruit? Remember that you can't manufacture good fruit out of whole cloth. It's fruit. That is, it's the product of something deeper. And the something deeper, according to John the Baptist is repentance. So the way to know whether you've really repented is to look at the fruit. And the way to produce the fruit is to repent of whatever it is in your life that is not of God. If you're not producing good fruit, then you'd better start. The axe is laid to the root of the trees. Repent and bear fruit.

The second question is this: If we take seriously the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, what are we doing to help people prepare for it? Say what you want about John the Baptist. His methods may seem harsh, but they are motivated by love. Even when he says "You brood of vipers!" he is warning them of their impending destruction. You don't warn people you hate, only those you love. How many people are perishing all around us, because they were never told about Jesus in such a way that they could see the good news? As the body of Christ, that's our job.

For as soon as someone does repent, the terrifying onset of the judge becomes the merciful return of the savior. It's not that he has changed; it's that we have. As soon as we have borne any good fruit at all, the baptism by fire is the absolute joy of purification. Isaiah says that in that day, "They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the

Lord as the waters cover the sea.” And I think that’s going to be worth seeing. I want everyone to see it. And so does Jesus.