

## Prepare the Way

*(This was originally written for the Second Sunday of Advent. That service was canceled due to weather, so the sermon is now available in written form.)*

We talked last week about the season of Advent. It is a time to feel our longing, to be aware of our need for Christ's return. The world is desperately broken and marred by sin, but Jesus is returning to set things right. While we feel the pain of the broken world, we look forward with great hope to his return because He is good. His character is trustworthy. He is the only One who can and will finally set things right. And so we long for and wait for his return. But our waiting must not be idle.

When Ellen and I first got married, we would travel to see family. A few days before the trip she would ask me, "How are you feeling about going to..." I tend to be so consumed by what's happening day-to-day that I don't have any feelings whatsoever about what is coming up in the days ahead. Ellen on the other hand has this building sense of anticipation before a trip. She will be super excited days before the trip. My lack of feeling was frustrating enough to her that she's finally stopped asking. But her excitement is a great service to us, particularly now that we have kids. I don't think about the trip until it's happening. So I pack my bags last minute and jump in the car. But Ellen has been thinking about the trip for weeks. Her excitement has caused her to prepare.

As we wait for the Lord's return, our waiting is not idle. We are preparing for the Lord's return. We are getting ready. He is coming soon. And so we must be ready. We must be prepared. This is what we're talking about this morning: How do we prepare for the Coming Christ?

As the people were waiting for the promised Messiah's first coming, God sent John the Baptist ahead as the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord." John's call to preparation for Christ's first coming guides us as we prepare for Christ's second coming. So let us look at what John said.

The heart of John's message is summed up in Luke 3:3. He proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. *Repentance*. John called people to see their errors and to leave behind their old ways. To leave behind the ways of sin and turn to the ways of the Lord. This is repentance.

If we read further down in Luke 3, John gets more direct with the people.

And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." (vv. 10-14)

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John calls out their selfishness, their mistreatment of others, their lies, and their greed. He calls them to examine their hearts and openly acknowledge their wrongdoing. He called people of position, power, and wealth to come down, to humble themselves. And those who humble themselves in repentance receive forgiveness of their sins.

This is the call before us now. As we await the Lord's return, we must be prepared. How do we prepare? We examine our hearts, we take stock of our actions, and *we repent*. We turn from the selfishness and greed and turn to the Lord. And in repentance we encounter the Lord. We receive His forgiveness. We experience the love and grace of the Father. Repentance is a sweet place. In repentance we experience the embrace of God. "The kingdom of God is not a kingdom of talk but of power." In repentance we experience kingdom power – forgiveness, reconciliation, freedom from sin and shame. There is no need for posturing, for empty talk, because we are secure in the Lord.

And let's be clear. Repentance is not something we do once when we come to faith. John's message was primarily to those who identified themselves as children of Abraham, as God's People. John is calling God's People to repentance. And those of us who are in Christ continue a life of repentance. The lie that we move beyond repentance allows hardness of heart to settle in. It allows shame to define us and steal life from us. It blinds us to the truth. Where we are not repentant, we cannot see clearly. Sin blurs our vision. And when our vision is blurred we are at risk of missing Him entirely. But in repentance we see Him clearly. We encounter the risen Christ in fullness. And so we live in repentance.

The call to repentance is a call to humility. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. He lifts up the humble but casts down the proud. This is what Christ, the Messiah does. "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways" (Luke 3:5). By repentance, those who once thought highly of themselves, now come down from their heights. And by his grace he restores the broken. He lifts up the humble. When we see ourselves rightly, we know we are nothing apart from Him. Without His forgiveness we are doomed. But He is faithful, so we depend on Him. So Paul says that he and the apostles are the scum of the earth by the earth's standards, and that's okay because it's the Lord's standard that matters. They are lowly now, but the Lord will lift them up.

What we do not do in repentance, the Lord will do when he comes in judgment. Every mountain and hill shall be made low. Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. One way or another, the lofty will be made low. All will acknowledge Him as Lord. Those who won't do it now, will bow before Him at judgment. Those who acknowledge Him as Lord now will walk in repentance. We do not move beyond it. We never get past our need for a Savior. So as we wait, we wait in humble repentance.

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There is a second way that we prepare for Christ to come again. John was sent ahead of Jesus first coming. He announced that the Kingdom was coming, for people to get ready. Now, as we await Christ's second coming, we walk in the place of John. We are called to be those who proclaim Christ's coming, to tell of His Kingdom. We are entrusted with the Great Commission, to go and make disciples. Like John, we say repent and turn to the Lord to receive grace and love in abundance. We are entrusted with proclaiming the Coming Kingdom in the way we live as the Body of Christ, Jesus' representatives. We proclaim His Coming when we live in unity and peace with one another.

Our proclamation is made from a place of humility. We know firsthand His grace and forgiveness. We don't point fingers in self-righteousness, but we tell people of His marvelous grace extended even to us, the greatest of sinners. Because we know the depth of our sin, we know the fullness of His grace. Because we know the fullness of His grace, our invitation to others to repentance is an invitation to love. We are not the self-righteous casting stones, but repentant pointing to the One who is our hope.

But we can only do those things well when we walk in humble repentance. In this season as we prepare for the coming of the Lord, let us prepare by examining our hearts that we would be those who eagerly go to the One who forgives. Let us receive His grace and love. And let us point the world to the One who forgives and sets right.