

Changing Our Ways to Make Room

A sermon in the 2020 Advent Sermon Series “Christmas Basics”

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- Isaiah 7:2-3, 6-7 Good News Translation

²The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light.

They lived in a land of shadows,
but now light is shining on them.

³You have given them great joy,^[a] Lord;
you have made them happy.

They rejoice in what you have done,
as people rejoice when they harvest grain....

⁶A child is born to us!

A son is given to us!

And he will be our ruler.

He will be called, “Wonderful Counselor,”

“Mighty God,” “Eternal Father,”

“Prince of Peace.”

⁷His royal power will continue to grow;
his kingdom will always be at peace.

He will rule as King David's successor,
basing his power on right and justice,
from now until the end of time.

The LORD Almighty is determined to do all this.

- Luke 3:2b-6, 15-18 (Good News Translation) At that time the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. ³So John went throughout the whole territory of the Jordan River, preaching, “Turn away from your sins and be baptized, and God will forgive your sins.” ⁴As it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah:

“Someone is shouting in the desert:

‘Get the road ready for the Lord;
make a straight path for him to travel!

⁵Every valley must be filled up,
every hill and mountain leveled off.

The winding roads must be made straight,
and the rough paths made smooth.

⁶The whole human race will see God's salvation!”

¹⁵...People's hopes began to rise, and they began to wonder whether John perhaps might be the Messiah. ¹⁶So John said to all of them, “I baptize you with water, but someone is coming who is much greater than I am. I am not good enough even to untie his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷He has his winnowing shovel with him, to thresh out all the grain and gather the wheat into his barn; but he will burn the chaff in a fire that never goes out.” ¹⁸In many different ways John preached the Good News to the people and urged them to change their ways.

Let me suggest a “glass-half-full” perspective: while this pandemic has taken away some familiar customs, it also presents us with an opportunity to focus on what’s

essential. That's the theme of my series for the church season of Advent this year: what are the basic messages that Christmas presents to us? What messages should we take from the Nativity and what messages should we share because of it?

On the First Sunday of Advent I suggested that, at root, one of the most basic messages of the Nativity is that God returns to us. Last Sunday we considered the significance of the term "incarnation" – that in Jesus Christ we see God "in the flesh," so to speak.

Here's another word that takes on important meaning on this, the Third Sunday of Advent: that word is "prepare."

"Prepare...." To various degrees we've all been preparing for this holiday season:

- I'll bet that some of you have already prepared and sent a letter to Santa.
- Perhaps you've prepared all the gifts on your giving list, having bought, wrapped, and mailed the parcels.
- Maybe you've prepared your home with festive lights, holiday ornaments, fragrant candles and garland and wreaths.
- Perhaps your Christmas cards are all prepared and just awaiting the postage stamps.
- You might have prepared your shopping list so you can whip up those special foods without which Christmas just wouldn't be Christmas in your home.

Each one of us has our own list of ways that we prepare for Christmas.

But Advent proclaims another way we are to prepare. That message comes from a biblical figure who we've all heard of, but who had a very minor role in the Christmas story: not Mary or Joseph, not an innkeeper or angel. It was John the Baptist.

Long before John earned the nickname "the Baptist" he made a brief appearance in the Christmas story – unnamed at first. Here's what happened: when Mary learned from the angel that she would bear a child who would be called "the Son of the Most High God," she hurried off to visit her cousin Elizabeth who also was pregnant. When Mary shared her news with Elizabeth, Elizabeth told her that the baby inside her moved with joy. That baby would be named John.

In adulthood John became an itinerant preacher, traveling from place to place throughout the Jordan River valley. His message could be summed up in one word: "Prepare!" He urged people, "Prepare for the coming of God's promised savior. Prepare by turning away from your sins – repent. Prepare by changing your ways."

Yes, John the Baptist announced to all who would listen, "Prepare!"

There are some events in life we cannot prepare for. But most of the time we want to be prepared if we possibly can.

- If you want to get your driver's license, you'll prepare by studying the rules of the road and you'll spend hours and hours practicing behind the wheel.
- If you're going to take a college entrance exam or sit for the bar exam, you'll spend hours and days and weeks preparing for it.
- If you're of Medicare age, the recent annual open enrollment period was an opportunity to prepare for the year ahead by studying your options, as many, many TV commercials reminded us.
- If you're expecting houseguests, you'll probably spend some amount of time preparing your home so they know they are welcomed.

There are many situations in which someone prepares the way for one who is to come:

- When you go to hear a comedian or a pop star or a country act or rock group, first you can expect a warm-up act intended to prepare the audience for the featured performer.
- If a high-level political figure travels domestically or internationally, an advance team prepares for the trip by scouting the venues to determine logistics and security issues.

We might think of John the Baptist as an "advance man" for the ministry of Jesus.

John said that his role was to prepare the people for the one who was to come. The way people were to prepare? In Luke Chapter 3, verse 3 he says plainly, "Turn away from your sins and be baptized, and God will forgive your sins." In John's thinking, being baptized was a person's way of signaling that they were sincere in wanting to turn away from selfish, self-centered, sinful behavior. That's how John got the nickname of "the Baptist" or "the Baptizer": he was the inspiring, life-changing preacher who urged people to signal their commitment by submitting to the ritual of being baptized.

Although John's ministry occurred many years after the birth of Jesus, we remember John's ministry at Christmastime. Why? Because in entering our world through the birth of Jesus God signals the desire to rescue us – to save us – from the consequence of our self-centered, sinful thinking and deeds. The birth of Jesus announces God's desire to forgive us... not because we deserve it or because God owes us, but simply by God's grace. The birth of Jesus calls us to prepare our lives so we are ready to welcome God's presence, so we are ready to seek God's will.

So John preached to the crowds. As the eighteenth verse of Luke Chapter Three records, “In many different ways John preached the Good News to the people and urged them to change their ways.”¹

In this season of Advent we, too, are called to “change our ways.” There’s a song we often hear and sing at this time of the year that includes this urgent plea: “Let every heart prepare him room.” In effect, that’s what John the Baptist preached: “Let every heart prepare him room.” We’re called to change our ways so that we

- make way for God to shape our thoughts;
- make way for God to guide what we say;
- make way for God to direct our actions;
- make way for God to fill our hearts.

We’re called to change our ways so that we give others the kind of thoughtful, respectful, helpful treatment we ourselves hope to receive.

We’re called to change our ways to choose what’s good for the world rather than thinking only of what’s good for us.

Through the preaching of John the Baptist we hear the call to prepare by making room in our hearts to receive God’s rescuing, saving grace. Preparing by changing our ways – that’s a basic message of Christmas for us as we prepare for the Nativity of Jesus Christ.

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¹ Good News Translation