

Every Heart Prepare Him Room

Matthew 3:1-12

Introduction

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. It is the Sunday during the season when we reflect on the need to prepare our hearts for Christ's return. As I mentioned last Sunday, Advent, as a whole, is a season of expectation and anticipation rooted in our belief that just as the Son of God came to earth, taking on flesh in the incarnation, to save us from our sins, He will also return again, to take his children home, to dwell with Him forever in the new creation.

Advent is the season when we reflect upon this relationship between Jesus' first coming and his second coming with a hope-filled expectation. A key aspect of that hope-filled expectation is our preparation. Prior to Jesus' first coming, there was a time of preparation, which will look at this morning in Matthew 3:1-12. Yet, even now, there is a time of preparation, a "making ready" that needs to take place, if we would receive Him and not be put to shame when He appears...

Matthew 3:1-12

¹ 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."

Exposition

There is so much in this passage that I would love to develop for us, but we will need to save that for a future Sunday. For now, I want us to consider the role that John the Baptist played in preparing the people of Israel to receive Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God...

Repentance is the Way of Preparation

John the Baptist preached a message of repentance to everyone who would listen to him. When John called his audience to “repent” he was calling them to “change their way of life as the result of a complete change of thought and attitude with regard to sin and righteousness.” He was not simply calling to have remorse or “feel bad” about their sins. He called them to “turn away from their sins” and “turn to God.”

As such, repentance is the counterpart to faith. We often tell people that they need to believe, to place their trust in Jesus Christ for salvation, and this is certainly true. Yet, along with such belief and trust in Jesus, there must also be repentance. One simply cannot claim to have placed their trust in Jesus Christ for salvation while still continuing to pursue the sin that Jesus has delivered them from. There must be a change of direction. A change of heart that bears fruit, which is what John challenged the religious leaders of his day to do. They were challenged to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”

John’s ministry of preaching to prepare the way of the Lord was prophesied in Isaiah 40, which Matthew quotes from in verse 3. The preparation, the making straight the way of the Lord, is found in repentance. A turning away from sin to the Lord in faith.

As Matthew moves from John’s message in verses 1-3 to a description of John in verses 4-6, we see that John bears similar characteristics to other prophets in the Bible, particularly Elijah. He was a man who wore clothing made of camel’s hair and ate what could be considered a common diet typically enjoyed by the poorest people in society. Locust and wild honey were meals found in nature. John was concerned with fulfill his work as the “voice of the Lord, crying out in the wilderness.” He wasn’t worried about the latest fashion or food that the world had to offer him. He was devoted to preparing hearts to receive Christ when he appeared.

John drew quite a crowd over time. He was known among the people as a prophet of the Lord, which was rare in these days. Many of the people were hungry to hear from the Lord, but it had been so long since a prophet truly spoke for the Lord. John was different. But with his differences came opposition from the religious leaders, the establishment of his day. We see this in verses 7-10, where John addresses the Pharisees and Sadducees, who were curious.

Like many in our day, there was a curiosity to see what this prophet’s message was. But John was not fearful. He knew his work was to prepare people to meet their God. He was not deterred by the presence of those who were more popular or polished than him. He spoke boldly to these religious leaders who not only put their confidence and hope in themselves but taught others to do the same by becoming like them. The Pharisees and Sadducees put their hope in their pedigree. They could trace their ancestry back to the twelve tribes of Israel. They were confident that they were God’s children by virtue of their birth.

John challenged their self-confidence and self-reliance. They were deceived. While it was true that they were descendants of Abraham in the flesh, the flesh profits nothing. As John warned them, God could raise up descendants of Abraham from stones. They would not be saved from the coming judgment because they had a good family or because they were religious or because they were well-liked in society or because they had a great education. No! They would only be saved if they turned away from their self-confidence and turned, instead, to God, with repentance. They were sinners in need of forgiveness that comes only through the grace of God in Christ. John's work was to prepare them for when Christ appeared. And while many listened, others did not.

There are many in our day that are interested in hearing the message of hope, but there are few who want to respond with the faith and repentance that are required. That may be true of you this morning. You are here, and you want to the hope that comes with knowing God, but you refuse to turn away from all the other things that you are hoping in. You do not fully trust Christ yet. You view Christ as one hope among many other hopes. So, what you are looking for is a diversified portfolio of salvation. You want Christ to be a part of it, but you are not really sure he alone truly is "the way, the truth, and the life," the One through whom we can come to God. So, you come to church, you have an interest in Jesus, and you say, "Oh, I trust him," but really, you've just added him to your portfolio. You are hedging your bets with Jesus, like an insurance plan.

But this is not the way that we prepare for his appearing. This is not the way we receive salvation. With repentance, we are called to let go of the sinful things we are pursuing and, instead, take hold of life in God. But we cannot make the preparation that is needed if we will not turn away from the things of this world and receive the gift of God's salvation. As Jesus would say later in the gospels, "we cannot serve two masters." We cannot live for the things of this world and also live for Christ. If we would take hold of Christ, then we must let go of the things that we are holding on to for hope and salvation in this world.

Conclusion

As I was preparing this message, I came across an illustration that another pastor used to show what repentance looks like; it is just too good not to share. The pastor mentions the movie, "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade." At this point, if you haven't seen it, then this will be a spoiler for you, but since the movie came out in 1989, I think it's fair to say that you've had your chance.

So, in one of the final scenes of the movie, after finding the "Holy Grail," which is supposedly the cup that Jesus used at the Last Supper and reportedly had miraculous powers to provide youth and healing to those who drank from it, Indiana Jones (played by Harrison Ford) and his father (played by Sean Connery) are trying to escape from this mountain that is collapsing. Indiana Jones has the "holy grail" with him, but trips, drops the grail, and ends up hanging off a ledge with one hand. His father made it past the ledge and stands over Indiana, offering him his hand. Indiana feels like he can reach the grail, which he dropped.

But as he reaches for the grail with one hand, his other hand is slipping. Indiana is saying, "I can just about reach it." His father stands over him, pleading, "Junior, take my hand. Take my hand." In the last effort to get Indiana to turn away from his pursuit of the "grail," the father says, "Let it go." And Indiana responds to his father, turns away from his pursuit of the grail, takes his father's hand, and is saved.

I wonder this morning how many people are here today or listening to this message online or that will listen to it at some point in the future, who are still reaching for salvation, for hope of eternal life in other places, while unknowingly slipping toward judgment.

This morning, it is time to "let it go" and hear the Father's word, "take my hand." Turn away from all the false hopes of this world and find hope in my son, Jesus Christ, the One who appeared once and will appear again soon.

Are you prepared? Have you prepared room for Jesus in your heart? Have you "let go" of the things of this world in order to take hold of the salvation, the forgiveness, the mercy, the grace, the love of God in Christ Jesus?

You can today! It's time to turn away, to repent, and place your trust in Jesus! It's time to be made new this morning!