

“Prepare the Way of the Lord”

Matthew 3:1-12

As I said last week, Advent is a season of preparation. In last week’s Gospel lesson, Jesus told His disciples to “stay awake, keep watch,” for you do not know on what day the Lord will return. In our Gospel lesson today, we hear the words of the prophet Isaiah spoken about John the Baptist: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord.’”

Last week the theme was “stay awake.” This week, we hear the words “be prepared.” How do we prepare for the coming of the Lord? Christmas lights, decorations, presents? Those are all good things. Yet, how does John tell us to prepare for the coming of the Lord? He says, “Repent.” Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

In the New Testament, John has many titles applied to him. He is called the Prophet. In next week’s Gospel lesson, Jesus says that he is more than a prophet. Jesus refers to him as the Elijah who was to come. He is called the Messenger. He is called the Witness. And his most common title is the Baptist.

However, no title describes him better than the word from Isaiah, the Voice. He is the Voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord.’ John lives and dies solely intent on performing this task that has been given to him by God. The man John is consumed in his office; the

caller is consumed in his calling.

John's call to repentance stirred all of Israel. His preaching was not like what the people were used to. John called upon them to confess their sins and have those sins washed clean in the waters of Baptism.

His teaching was very different from the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees that came out to where he was baptizing. There was no self-righteousness allowed in the teaching of John the Baptist. He says to the Pharisees and Sadducees, these teachers and misusers of the Law: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

The Pharisees and Sadducees were not coming out to the desert to repent and be baptized. They were coming out to see why all of the people were so excited. Why was John drawing such crowds of people? They saw no need for repentance or confession of sin on their part, because, after all, they were not sinners like the rest of these people. In their mind, they were pillars of virtue.

Christ called them "white-washed sepulchers." They were beautiful on the outside, but on the inside, they were filled with dead men's bones.

When people came to be baptized by John in the Jordan, he did not wash them with water to clean them on the outside. When he baptized them, it was a baptism of repentance to clean them on the inside. When he cried out, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," he called people to repent, to turn from their sin. Then, in Baptism, God would wash clean all of the guilt of every sin with which they have ever offended Him, and because of the sacrifice of Christ, whose way John was preparing, those hearing John could live forever in the purity and forgiveness which Baptism brings.

That was how John prepared the way for the Lord. That is how he prepared the people for the coming of Christ. That is the way that we are prepared for the coming of Christ: repenting of our sin, trusting in the forgiveness that our Savior brings, and rejoicing in the faith and forgiveness of our Baptism.

Preparation for the Advent and Christmas Seasons did not occur when you put up your Christmas tree or put the inflatable Santa Claus on his motorcycle in your front yard. Julianna begged me to get the Christmas Darth Vader inflatable. Thankfully, the covenant in our condo association doesn't allow that.

This time of year, we hear people continually asking each other, "Are you ready for Christmas?" The common answer is, "No. I haven't bought half of my presents yet." Or "No. I never do any shopping until the week before."

Answers such as these have very little to do with preparation for the coming of Christ. Decorating our homes and our church to celebrate the incarnation of the Son of God is a great tradition. Buying gifts for your loved ones to celebrate the birth of Jesus is a great and long-standing Christian tradition.

However, putting up the tree or hanging lights or buying the first gift on your list is not when your preparation for Christmas began. Christmas is a celebration that Christ has come. The preparation we see during Advent is to be a reminder that He who has come is coming again.

But your preparation for the coming of Christ didn't start with the first decorations or presents. It started when your sins were washed away in the

waters of Holy Baptism. God prepared you for the coming of His Son when He called you to faith and welcomed you into His family.

We are prepared for the coming of Christ because of what God has done for us, not because of what we have purchased, wrapped and laid under the Christmas tree. We are prepared for the coming of Christ because of what Christ purchased for us with His own blood. We are prepared for the coming of Christ because Christ was wrapped in His burial cloth and laid in a closed tomb. We are prepared for the coming of Christ because that wrapping and that tomb could not hold the Son of God.

The joy that we have at Christmas is not the joy of opening presents on Christmas morning. The joy that we have at Christmas is the joy of Christ's tomb opening on Easter morning. Christmas is such a wonderful time of the year because of what that little child born in Bethlehem meant to the world and means to each of us here today.

Because the Son of God entered into the world, we have received the promise that our sins are forgiven. God has known you from eternity, and He has prepared you from the day that you were baptized for Christ's return. He has washed you clean on the inside.

Just as John the Baptist, the Voice, prepared the way for Christ's ministry on earth, the voice of Christ heard in His Church on earth has prepared you, as God's people, not only to celebrate the birth of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, but we are prepared to hear His voice when He comes again. Amen.