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Advent II

December 7, 2025

Text: Matthew 3:1 – 12

Title: Prepare for Christ! Repent! Live! Bear Fruit! (based on a sermon from CPR)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Preparing the path of Christ—preparing the way of the Lord—is Old Testament imagery from Isaiah that our Gospel in Matthew uses to describe the prophetic and baptismal ministry of John the Baptist (Mt 3:3). John's prophetic message was that the Lord was coming in grace and judgment, so it was time for the people of Judea and Galilee to prepare. Due to the sinful rebellion and idolatry of God's people, it was almost as if God's path to return to his people had become a dangerous wilderness of rough terrain! It was John's purpose to get the people ready for that coming so that the Christ would not find a barren wilderness where his people were, but rather a people waiting in eager expectation for his arrival to deliver them from sin. John was there to prepare Christ's path just as the prophets said he would be.

If John the Baptist thought the spiritual condition of first-century Israel was challenging, imagine what he'd think if he were preaching in the spiritual wilderness of twenty-first-century America. We have the whole menu of false religions from Islam to Mormons to Satanism and witchcraft, a huge segment of the population practices no religion, and a significant portion of Christian churches deny central teachings of the faith such as justification by faith alone and the resurrection of the body. And you can just imagine what John the Baptist would say about all of the moral ambiguity and cultural rot that exists around us today! It is specifically because of these challenges that this account of John the Baptist continues to contain an important message for the Church. As we look at this text again for Advent, as the Church has traditionally heard from John the Baptist each year, we the Church continue John the Baptist's important work in Advent: Preparing Christ's Path!

This text from Matthew focuses on three important aspects to preparing Christ's path that are still very applicable to our lives and the Church today. First, the central word in John the Baptist's preaching that prepared Christ's path for His arrival was *repent*. Just as Lent is a season of preparation, repentance, and spiritual refreshment for Christians, so also is Advent, even if it is a shorter time. It is a time to quit kidding ourselves about how good and holy we're becoming, especially from our own efforts. It's a time to honestly recognize our sins—in thought, word, and deed—and above all it is a time to repent.

John the Baptist did not sugarcoat his condemnation of sinners. Just like each of the prophets of ancient Israel, John bluntly told people about the deep trouble that they were in without the grace of God. *Repent* does not mean just being contrite or sorry for your sins, but it also encompasses faith. As you repent, you do it from a place of believing in God's grace to forgive sins for the sake of Christ's saving work. Without the Holy Spirit working the miracle of faith within you, being sorry for your sin and regretting it is only another dead end. With his mention of the kingdom of heaven, John is instead pointing his hearers to God's gracious work in Jesus to bring God's reign back to this sinful earth. Just as John called people of old to repent alongside the Jordan River, Advent is a special time for us Christians to repent and to also call the unbelieving world to join us in repenting.

Three simple words that most people, including many of us Christians, find really difficult to say are, "I am sorry." When we transgress against God or against someone else, we would rather yell about it, scream about it, and argue about who is to blame than to just tell God or that other person that, "I'm sorry." Evidence of repentance, of faith worked by the Holy Spirit, which we see in our Gospel, is when the people coming to John and being baptized by him confess their sins.

Advent is a time for us to be honest with God and with one another by confessing our wrongs, our sins. It's a time to really think about the things that we do to offend God and others according to the Ten Commandments. I would guess that during our times of confession each time we're together here, you don't give much personal thought to the ways that you have sinned against God. It's too easy to get to that point of silence in the Divine Service when you're supposed to be reflecting on how you have broken God's Law and to just kind of stand there in a daze, looking at the floor or the back of the person sitting in front of you. It's certainly easier to just say the words like we did today, and not really think about what they mean. Do you remember the times over the past week that you've sinned against God or someone else? Did you take God's name in vain at all? Did you love Him with all of your heart and soul and mind each and every day? Did you gladly hear and learn God's Word each chance that you had to hear it, like during our Advent service this past week? Have you loved your neighbor as yourself each day and treated them the way that you want to be treated?

I could certainly continue this list for quite a while, but I think you get the point. There is much that we have to regret and to repent of, and that is how we are to prepare for Christ's coming, even as we confess those sins to God and to one another. Confession of sin is the rhythm of life for a Christian. Advent is a time to make sure that we are back in that rhythm of confessing our sins to God and also to one another.

The second aspect to preparing Christ's path that's revealed in our Gospel is to live in your baptismal grace. Jews did many ritual washings seeking purity from their sins. For example, some of the remains uncovered at Qumran in addition to the Dead Sea Scrolls, near the same region where John did his baptisms, include *mikvahs*, or washing pools with steps that would let you walk right down into the water for ritual cleansing. The baptisms that John performed were different than what we do as Christians today; they were a one-time washing that showed God's

forgiveness for that one time. John's work was a one-time sharing of God's forgiveness in a very tangible way that people had not seen before. As people were plunged under the waters of the Jordan River, they were washed of their sin through Baptism. But it was a baptism that laid the foundation for the Christian Baptism you and I have received.

We continue to prepare the way for Christ in this Advent season as we live in and treasure our baptismal grace. John the Baptist said, "He who is coming after me is mightier than I. . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (v 11). As amazing as John the Baptist was with his preaching and baptism, you have received something greater, the very preaching and Baptism of Jesus. When you were baptized, at whatever age that might have happened to you, you received the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, who united you with all the saving work of Jesus Christ. His entire obedient life. His perfect death as a payment for all of your sin, and his glorious and bodily resurrection victory!

All of this means that an important aspect of preparing Christ's path is simply living in this baptismal grace, claiming it, and treasuring it, living in its power and peace. Knowing that each day you wake up as a baptized child of God means that you continue to belong to Him, and that the world around you should be seeing you as one of His own. Advent is a time to get back to the spiritual basics of living the Christian life, and Baptism is one of those spiritual foundations that we should cling to throughout our entire lives.

Finally, this Gospel text reveals to us a third aspect that we need in preparing Christ's path, both for His first and second coming. John says, "Bear the fruit of repentance!" (v 8). Taken at face value, this command sounds pretty challenging. John even follows it up with a strong word of judgment: "Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (v 10). If we are sinners, and we know full well that we are, then how can we poor, pathetic trees ever hope to produce good fruit? The best part of all of this is that since

the Holy Spirit works in us to produce repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, that means that it is not us who will produce the good fruit that the Lord is looking for in us.

Instead of it being up to us and our own feeble efforts, it's a task for the Holy Spirit! That same Holy Spirit that we received abundantly through our own Baptism when we were united with Christ. The fruit that God looks for and that we cannot ever produce by our own sinful nature—such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—that is the fruit that the Holy Spirit can and will produce in and through us. We prepare Christ's path by bearing the fruit of faith for the world to see, fruit miraculously produced not by us, but by the Holy Spirit. When you stop and help someone who is broken down at the side of the road, you are showing the fruit of the Spirit. When you manage to resist giving into a temptation, you are showing a fruit of the Spirit. When you treat the clerk at the store with a little courtesy and respect after the person in front of you was rude to them, you are showing some of the fruit of the Spirit. In short, whenever you show love for your neighbor without even giving it any thought, the fruit of the Spirit is showing clearly and fully in you.

John the Baptist must have been overwhelmed with his task—so much to do to prepare Galilee and Judea for Christ's coming. We may feel overwhelmed with our mission. But it all starts within each of us by repenting and confessing our sins, living in our baptismal grace, and bearing the fruit of repentance worked by the Holy Spirit. The path to our hearts is then wide open. We, in turn, want others to experience the undeserved love of God in Christ that we already have in these holy days of Advent. So, we call others to repent and confess their sins along with us, to be baptized and to receive the Holy Spirit, and to bear the fruits of repentance that the Holy Spirit produces. Take this time of Advent to prepare Christ's path—to your heart and to the hearts of others. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.