

Michael J. Mathey
Advent II
December 4, 2022
Text: Matthew 3:1 – 12
Title: Where to Begin?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. No matter what you have to do when you leave your home or where you're planning to go, there is always one thing you have to know before you ever even leave the house. You need to know how to get where you're going in the first place! Some destinations, like going to visit a family member who lives locally, usually don't require all that much to check on because you've probably been there before. For other trips you might need GPS or even an old-fashioned map in order to reach your goal. But wherever it is that you're going, even if it's just to the store for a few items, it's pretty unusual to leave home without having a plan of where you're going.

In some sermons, believe it or not, this is the point where you might actually hear a preacher berate the congregation for planning too much. Planning shows that you don't really trust in God's Sovereignty they might say. Or perhaps they might accuse you of not having enough faith because you find it necessary to have your home looked after while you're away. Maybe they would just present a list of "how-to's" in order to help their people be more efficient or more spiritual in their preparation. It's even possible that the congregation might be given a list of different ways to give the journey a more Christian focus. Depending on who you're listening too, I also wouldn't be surprised to hear an alternative suggestion given for the money that you might spend on the trip that you have planned, like sending it to the preacher you're listening too instead. Regardless, by listening to these people it would be easy to get the misconception that planning is a bad thing.

But nothing could be further from the truth. This time of the Church year shows us that even God made plans, His just take a lot longer to complete than ours. The Lord first revealed His ultimate plan the moment that He confronted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It was at that point that God made His first promise to send a Savior into the world to destroy the sin that had entered it when He said, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” With these words the Lord’s plan for salvation was put into motion, and His entire Word, which we call the Bible, is the record of that plan.

This week’s part of the plan comes to us from the third chapter of Matthew. He writes, “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea.” Matthew then continues by telling us that John’s arrival both reveals and fulfills the part of the plan that we first heard from the mouth of Isaiah, “For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Enter John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus; he is one more step in the completion of the Lord’s plan for our salvation as the Lord uses him to prepare the way for the Messiah.

John’s method of preparation for the people of that day was simple. He conducted a ministry in the wilderness surrounding Jerusalem, and people from all over Judea and Jerusalem came out to hear his message of repentance and to be baptized by him in the Jordan River for the forgiveness of their sins. The people heard John’s message and they confessed their sins just like he urged them to do. His appearance made quite a stir. He spoke like a prophet. He acted like a prophet, and he even dressed like the prophet Elijah. John was the first prophet of the Lord in over 400 years and the people were incredibly excited.

But the Lord's plan doesn't center around John the Baptist. It centers on Jesus Christ. John came to help prepare the people with his message which Matthew faithfully records in this part of his gospel, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand... You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'" John's purpose was to point to the one who was just about to arrive, Jesus Christ.

The members of the Christian Church today are called to do the exact same thing that John the Baptist did. We are called to proclaim the message of repentance to the world around us. We are called to encourage baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and we are called to announce the forgiveness that only comes through faith in Jesus Christ. Finally, we are called to prepare for His coming into the world. His second coming that is.

There are many distractions in this world which try to keep you from that mission and the message of it. False leaders try to distract you from your focus on Christ by offering messages that have little or nothing to do with Him, much like the ones that I mentioned earlier. Your sinful nature does its best to move your focus to anything other than your relationship with Christ. The daily routines of a busy lifestyle distract you from the work of nourishing your faith in regular worship and Bible Study. Pressures from the society around you succeed in

discouraging you from even attempting to share your faith with those around you. It might offend them or embarrass you. Never mind the fact that their salvation may depend on your courage to share your faith with them.

Jesus Christ will come back to this world, and Jesus Christ will judge those who are faithful to Him and those who are not. The time left here is anyone's guess. But it could end for any one of us at any time. That's part of the Lord's plan, and it will continue to unfold in the way that He wants it too. Peter's second epistle tells us about it in chapter 3, verse 10, "...the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed."

When that day comes and Christ returns unexpectedly, just like a thief, will you be prepared? If you think so, how can you be sure? What makes you so certain that you will be among those who receive eternal life on Judgment Day when you know the sins that you have committed?

The answer is twofold, and John the Baptist's ministry helps to provide it to us. First and foremost is the incarnation of Christ Himself as a human child in a manger. John knew that Christ was the Father's answer for sin, and that a major part of the Lord's plan was about to be fulfilled in an awesome way. The Holy Spirit provided him with that knowledge.

Christ's perfect life in this world fulfilled the requirements of the Law, and His sacrifice on the cross paid the penalty for all of your sins. Nothing is left to be done for your salvation. His blood washes you clean and pure so that your sins are already paid for before He returns.

The second part of the answer that assures you of your salvation is the same answer that John the Baptist provided to the people in his day. The answer is simple: your Baptism. It

serves as an assurance of the promises of God for you. Through your Baptism, the Holy Spirit marked you as a child of God, and you were given His name to identify you as His child.

Through your Baptism, the Holy Spirit gave you the gift of faith, and He drowned your sinful nature to make you a new creation in Christ Jesus. Through your Baptism, you were given the Holy Spirit who makes you new every day as you learn to live a life that is holy and pleasing to the Father. A life of repentance and forgiveness that will continually strengthen you to do His will in your life.

All of these things that are accomplished through your Baptism will prepare you for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ on that Day of Judgment. As we continue through this Advent season, prepare yourself to celebrate the Christ's first arrival by taking advantage of every opportunity to hear His Word preached and read in worship. That's why we gather together on Wednesdays during Advent, to prepare ourselves to celebrate His first arrival. But we also add that extra time of prayer, worship and meditation on God's Word to prepare ourselves for His Second Coming, which will be anytime.

Thankfully, it has not happened yet because as II Peter also says, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance." Pray that His patience would continue until all of His sheep are gathered into His fold. Finally, pray that His return will be soon so that His plan will finally and completely be fulfilled. Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.