

Sermon ✝ December 4, 2022

Matthew 3:1-12

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From the middle of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th, folks in city and country were treated annually to a display of pure American art — the circus poster.

A month or so before the "big show" came to town, a crew of bill-posters would arrive. Fanning out in all directions, the crew would decorate the town and surrounding countryside with a large variety of those colorful heralds announcing the glory and thrills, the glamor and excitement, of that most magical of worlds soon to arrive *"for one day and one day only."*

If the life of the circus performer was seen as exciting and glamorous, the life of the bill-poster was tedious and hard work, never accompanied by applause or any sign of appreciation. Few people ever noticed him at work, but when he was done, the results of it were seen on the sides of barns, wooden fences, and in store windows. It was not at all the job of the bill poster to call attention to himself. His job was to leave a visible proclamation of the greater than himself that was yet to come.

So with John the Baptizer. “. . . *One who is more powerful than I is coming after me.*” John was not the big show, but came to be the proclaimer that the Big Show was coming.

We are told to *"Prepare the way of the Lord!"* John did that, and yet we often forget about him. He also spent a lot of time baptizing people. We are a baptized people and yet we often forget about our own baptism.

One way for us to *"prepare the way"* this Advent season is to consider our own baptism as we try live out its promises every day

Baptism is called the sacrament of belonging. When were you baptized? It should be as important a day as your birthday.

What is Baptism? It is many things . . . born into God's family. Its word of promise is that God forgives sin and delivers us from death. Its word of promise is that God is your God; it is a visible sign of God's everlasting love.

In baptism, we recognize that our children are not *our* children. We call them ours and yet they are not. Children are not possessions. Children are gifts that come from God. As parents, we are the stewards or trustees of God's children. The poet, Gibran, wrote:

*"Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are one with you,
yet they belong not to you.
You may house their bodies but not their souls"*

By the act of Baptism, a child is taken into the whole family of God, thus becoming part of the larger family. The *family* includes those whom we may never know, but for whom we must be concerned.

It is not only the child who is claimed by God but also the sponsors and witnesses. We all accept the responsibility for the child who is baptized. If this baptism means anything, then we share this commitment with all the children of God.

So what do we do with this gift? The act of baptism is performed only once and yet we live out its consequences everyday, (like marriage). To live out our baptism means to constantly recall its promise.

A few moments ago I said, “*Baptism’s word of promise is that God forgives . . .*” And . . . in order for forgiveness to take place there must be confession and repentance.

We are now back to John the Baptist. He was all about confession and repentance. *To confess* is to openly admit our sins before God. The definition of sin is that sin is anything that separates us from God. *To repent* is to be truly sorry. The literal meaning of repentance is to turn your face in a different direction . . . to choose a different path than the one you’re presently on. Because of baptism, a newness of life can be ours.

At the same time we need to remember that baptism does not protect us from temptation or from messing up again and again, . . . but it does link/connect us with the love of God whereby we can be restored and strengthened.

In order to truly prepare the way of the Lord, it is necessary for us to get in touch with our own baptism and the newness of life that it offers. Baptism creates a new, close, and warm relationship with God. The new birth in Baptism and the new relationship with God opens up new possibilities for life.

Baptism reminds us that God loves us and forgives us. And knowing that God loves and forgives, helps us to love, forgive, and live with ourselves.

So . . . Prepare the way of the Lord! May this Advent be meaningful for you. In the midst of Christmas shopping, and card writing, and tree trimming, may you take time for God.

May you pause this Advent and glory in your own baptism and ponder its meaning.

And may you praise God as Martin Luther did so many years ago when he wrote:

I thank, praise, and glorify you, my Lord Christ, with heart and voice before the world that you are merciful to me and do help me.

*This I have received in baptism, that you and none other shall be my Lord and my God.
Amen.*