

Sermon: "Advent"

Scripture: Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locust and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our ancestor; Even now the ax is lying at 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 one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his heat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Advent has traditionally been a season of preparation. The church over the centuries has come to understand that Christians need to set aside regular times of the year to consider again the full significance of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. The meaning and joy of Christmas will easily elude us unless we make a focused effort to dwell ahead of time on the promises of God that have come to fulfillment in Jesus' birth.

The Churches traditional advent practice stands in tension with contemporary culture. The rhythms of a secular, consumer society have displaced the church year. In that society, preparations for Christmas have been reduced to hanging twinkling Christmas lights, listening to cheery holiday music, and gazing at an abundance of material goods for the buying, all of which we hope will evoke in us a sense of magical, childlike wonder and goodwill. Not the promises of God, but our own ideals and longings, have become the focus.

How different is the preparation to which John the Baptist calls the people of Israel! The promises of God that are coming to fulfillment in Christ should compel people to confess their sins. John asks us to examine ourselves, rather than bask in holiday wonder. We should bear good fruit, rather than worry about material things to get or give. John is almost a comical figure, dressed in camel's hair, and eating locust and wild honey, but his message is hard-hitting: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Repentance is a confusing concept to many Christians today. Does it mean feeling sorry for our mistakes? Is it a matter of trying to be a better person? Is repentance something that we even need to do, if our lives are now hidden with Christ, our Savior? For some Christians, language of repentance dredges up feelings of guilt and unworthiness, and may even evoke a deathly fear of a day of judgement, when God will separate the wheat from the chaff. For them, the question soon becomes, Can I ever be sure enough that I will experience God's mercy rather than God's wrath?

What John – and Advent – remind us is that repentance is not primarily about our standards of moral worthiness, but rather about God's desire to realign us to accord to Christ's life. Repentance is not so much about our guilt feelings as about God's power to transform us into Christ image. For Matthew, John's strange clothes and harsh sayings are necessary aspects of communicating the full meaning of the Gospel. While warm and fuzzy feelings at Christmastime are not all wrong, they fail to capture the full picture of what God has done for us in becoming human flesh.

Matthew uses several key images to enlarge our vision. One important image is the wilderness; John preaches in the wilderness and is a voice crying out in the wilderness. Wilderness evokes memories of the

joyous yet troubled history of Israel. God led the people of Israel out of bondage into the wilderness, yet they feared that God had brought them there to die. They sinned and rebelled against God in the wilderness, yet also learned to trust and obey God there. The repentance that befits the church's observance of Advent will have similar dynamics.

We will remember and affirm that Christ has brought each of us out of bondage and has fundamentally reoriented our life. Our own wanderings in the Christian life will not be without wilderness hesitancy and resistance, yet God promises to keep pointing the way ahead.

A second image for Matthew is baptism. John baptizes people in the Jordan as they confess their sins. This baptism, says John, points forward to a more radical baptism in Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. This new baptism will be much more than a symbol of our own efforts to live according to God's will, for it will represent God's act of fully claiming us for new life in Christ. Advent has similar meanings. We repent as we remember and affirm the new identity given us in baptism. We have been buried and raised with Christ and have been adopted into the family of God. Other key images evoke God's judgment and wrath. The ax is being laid to the root of the trees; every tree without good fruit will be thrown into the fire; Christ has a winnowing fork to thresh the grain; Christ will clear his threshing floor; the chaff will be burned with an unquenchable fire.

We all discover this Advent, not only that we are cherished for who we are, but we are responsible for what we do.

Matthew wants to make clear that the kingdom of God brings about a fundamental break with the past. The world no longer goes about its normal business. Human ideals and longings have been shaken to the core. At the same time, God's judgement is essentially related to God's promises: the old is passing away, in Christ the new has come. Similarly, in Advent the Church practices repentance as it remembers and affirms that this world no longer has the last word, and that we live instead by hope in a new heaven and earth.

The preparation to which John calls Israel, like the preparation to which Advent calls the Church, happens not primarily as self-purification but rather by way of radical trust that Christ himself is working to purify us and the world around us to become a dwelling place fit for himself. Remembrance of God's promises nurtures this trust, and faithful service to the world affirms it. We need the space that Advent provides for remembering and affirming Christ's incarnation and all that it means for us.

The Church's rediscovery of Advent will come in small steps, such as when we learn the difference between Advent hymns and Christmas carols, recover ancient practices of Advent fasting and waiting, or pray the daily lectionary of Advent with its themes of judgement and purification. These Advent disciplines prepare us for Christmas joy and feasting (including holiday lights, music, and presents!) when they finally arrive. But this Advent preparation also does something more. It rehearses us in the way of life that should flow out of Christmas, a life marked by a steady confidence that God's kingdom is indeed at hand.

Let Me Tell You a Story:

One December afternoon – a group of parents stood in the lobby of a nursery school waiting to claim their children after the last pre-Christmas class session. As the youngsters ran from their lockers, each one carried in his or her hands the “Surprise”, the brightly wrapped package on which they had been working diligently for weeks. One small boy, trying to run, put on his coat, and wave to his parents, all at the same time, slipped and fell.

The “Surprise” flew from his grasp, landed on the floor and broke with an obvious ceramic crash. The child – began to cry inconsolably. His father, trying to minimize the incident and comfort the boy, patted his head and murmured, “Now, that's all right son. It doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter at all.” But the child's mother, somewhat wiser in such situations, swept the boy into her arms and said, “Oh, but it does matter. It matters a great deal.” And she wept with her child.

It does matter. Our Advent worship, Advent hymns, Advent expectations, and Advent comforts require the reminder that John the Baptist makes so clear. It does matter. We do matter. Perhaps the church can give up on judgement, but we can not give up on responsibility.

PRAYER:

Merciful God, you sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation.

Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our redeemer, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

Maybe our people are not as hopeless as we thought. Looking back on Advent past they find the courage to trust in Advent present and wait for Advent to come. Those ghost who made Scrooge look back before he could look ahead had a point. Nostalgia is memory filtered through disproportionate emotions. Faith is memory filtered through appropriate gratitude.

GO IN PEACE!