

Joshua Willadsen
First Sunday of Advent
Sermons``
December 5, 2010

MATTHEW 3:1-12 - "PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD"

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Last week I announced to that the King is coming at a day and hour unknown to any but God the Father. The King is coming to judge and divide all humanity between the sheep and the goats, between the righteous and the unrighteous, between those who will inherit the new world prepared for them and those who will be cast into unquenchable flame. Are you ready for the King's coming? Are you prepared for the return of the LORD your God?

Now is the time to be prepared for the coming of the LORD, Jesus Christ, your God and King! Now is the time to repent; now is the time to be converted from unbelief to faith! Now is the time for you to die and rise with Christ! Now is the time to turn from sin and trust in the forgiveness that Christ gives in His Word! Now is the time to be prepared, because the LORD is coming to the earth to judge sin, wickedness, and evil!

The season of Advent is all about being prepared for the final coming of Christ, the LORD our God and King. During this time the preaching, teaching, and hymns of the church call us to repentance and hope; they declare to us that Christ the LORD has already come and dealt with sin, evil, and death in His death and resurrection. They declare to us that Christ the LORD is present today in Baptism, the preached Word, and Holy Communion to deliver the forgiveness, freedom, and new life that He has won for us and to effect the very repentance, the conversion from unbelief to faith, the turning from sin to trusting His promises, that He calls us to. They declare that Christ the LORD is returning to raise His repentant people to everlasting life in a new earth where sin, death, and evil shall threaten us no longer.

The season of Advent is also a time that we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ the LORD our God and King. It is a time to ponder the wonderful mystery that God has become flesh in Jesus Christ, that He is Emmanuel, God with us. It is a time to reflect upon the wonders of God's mercy and grace for His people and all creation, that Jesus was born to die, to save us from our sins. Christ did not come so that we could exchange gifts with each other, enjoy great meals, relax, shop, or indulge ourselves with our hearts delight. Christ did not come so that we could give money to the Salvation Army, feed the poor, be charitable to those in need, or so that we could have a day in which we are kind to everyone. Christ the LORD our God came to deal with our rebellion and the problem of evil; He came to die and to rise!

Prior to Christ's public ministry in Israel, God sent John the Baptizer to prepare the way for His coming. John was God's chosen prophet sent to preach, "Repent, for the reign of heaven is near" and to baptize for repentance, the lost sheep of the house

of Israel. Isaiah had spoken before hand of his ministry in the midst of Israel (Isaiah 40:3), a ministry of turning people back to God who had fallen away, a ministry of preparing the way of the LORD. The expectation of the Old Testament, the expectation of Second Temple Judaism, and the expectation of John was that the LORD God was coming to the earth from heaven to rule and right wrongs, to deal with sin and evil and comfort those whose trust was in the name the LORD.

Matthew 3:1-4 reads: 1 And in those days John the Baptizer appeared preaching in the wilderness of Judea 2 saying, "Repent for the reign of heaven is near." 3 For this was the one of whom it was spoken through Isaiah the prophet saying, "A voice calling out in the wilderness; prepare the way of the LORD, make straight His paths." 4 And John had his clothing from the hairs of a camel and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the surrounding region of the Jordan began to come out to him, 6 and they were baptized in the Jordan River by him while confessing their sins.

John's ministry was very distinctive. He stayed in the wilderness of Judea instead of towns, villages, and cities; he did not go to the people, but God brought them to him. He ate locusts and wild honey. His clothing was made from the hair of camels and he had a leather belt. John's physical description in fact purposely matched that of another prophet before him, Elijah, whom God promised would return before the end (see 2 Kings 1:8). John preached that God Himself was soon coming to the earth; that unbelieving Israel needed to repent, to convert from unbelief to faith in the God of Israel; and that God was effecting that needed conversion and giving His forgiveness through the baptism with water that John was administering. God's Word was very fruitful during John's ministry as hosts of people from Jerusalem, Judea, and the region of the Jordan came out to John and were baptized by Him.

John's ministry was so distinctive that the Pharisees and Sadducees took notice of it and began to come out to John. They were keen to follow public opinion polls, eager to do what was popular in the eyes of the people. The Pharisees and Sadducees had appearances to maintain amongst the people of Israel; they were willing to go through the motions of repentance or conversion, even though they believed this was unnecessary for them. The Pharisees and Sadducees were "covenantal nomists," they assumed that because they were born into the covenant people of Israel and had not committed gross sin nor lapsed into gross heresy, that they had a righteous standing in light of God's Law and would be saved from God's wrath against the ungodly.

The Pharisees and Sadducees assumed wrong; they too needed to repent. They like most of the people had fallen away from God and were lost in unbelief; they too needed to be converted to faith in God and His promises, instead of their ancestry, outward purity, and following of the Law. Matthew records John's encounter with the **Pharisees and Sadducees:** 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism he said to them, "Offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Therefore produce fruit worthy of repentance 9 and do not think to say in yourselves, 'A father we have, Abraham.' For I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 10 But already the ax lies toward the root of the trees; therefore every tree not producing noble fruit will be cut off and cast into the fire. 11 I, myself, am baptizing with water for repentance, but the One who is coming after me is greater than me, concerning

Whom I am not worthy to bear his sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire; 12 Whose winnowing fork is in His hand and will cleanse His threshing floor and gather His wheat into His barn, but the chaff He will consume with fire unquenchable.”

John confronted the Pharisees and Sadducees with the strongest words, calling them offspring of vipers. As God’s prophet, John knew they had come to be baptized not for repentance but for the sake of appearances; this is why John tells them “produce fruit worthy of repentance.” By “worthy” John was not implying that Pharisees and Sadducees earn or work for their repentance, that a penance must be done first before sins are forgiven; rather that one who comes to be baptized for repentance is to live a new life in accordance with the repentance that God has granted. Remember to repent is to be converted from unbelief and to trust in God’s promises to save; it is a death to the old sinful life and a new beginning in God’s forgiveness. John warned the Pharisees and Sadducees that the time of judgment was at hand, the axe was lying at the root of the trees ready to cut off that which is dead in unbelief and sin. They had no claim on God; they may have been descendants of Abraham by blood, but it is God who makes children for Abraham, even from stones!

As if these words were not enough to make his point clear and plain to the Pharisees and Sadducees, John warned them of the judgments of the One to come after Him who was greater even than he was. The coming One, the Christ, the King, the LORD, would give eternal life or eternal death; this is what it means to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John’s ministry was one of preparation and mercy. God had sent John ahead of His coming so that those who were lost in unbelief and sin might be prepared, so that they might be baptized with water for repentance, for conversion from unbelief to faith, so that they might be spared the coming baptism with fire.

Christ, the King, the LORD Jesus, came though not quite as expected. Jesus did speak words of life and death; He did pour out the Holy Spirit upon His disciples who believe in Him and He did pronounce judgment upon those who rejected Him. But Jesus has not yet baptized any with the Holy Spirit in full nor with fire; Jesus shall do this at His coming on the Last Day. Jesus did not come in a blaze of glory, might, and judgments as one would expect from the King of kings and LORD of lords, instead He came humbly and identified Himself with sinners and unbelievers whom God was leading to repentance. The LORD and King received the baptism of John Himself, the baptism with water for repentance. Jesus became marked for death for the sake of the lost sheep of the house of Israel, for the sake of the lost in all the nations, for you! Jesus embraced His death destiny on the cross so that sinners like us might be brought to repentance, so that He might pour out the Holy Spirit upon us and give us everlasting life upon His return on the Last Day.

Christ Jesus, the LORD, our King in His resurrection called His Apostles together and sent them in His authority to bring all the nations, all people, to repentance, to be converted from unbelief to faith in Him as His disciples. For this purpose Jesus created and command a new baptism, a new washing away of sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; this is the baptism that we have received, that has

been preached to us. You who are baptized, God has forgiven your sins for the sake of LORD Jesus Christ; God has melted your heart of stone and made you a child and heir of Abraham. Jesus has poured out His Spirit upon you, Who even now continues to give and work faith in your heart through Gospel. You have been converted now in this age, so that at the LORD's return on the Last Day, He might pour out the Holy Spirit upon you in full, raising your bodies to life everlasting.

Therefore live a new life worthy of repentance. Do not delight in sin, for you have died to sin. Do not trust in you own works for the assurance of your salvation, for they will fail you. Do not take confidence in any choice or decision of yours. Do not act proud and arrogant thinking, "I am saved by grace and now I am not like those other people." Do not become like the Pharisees and Sadducees who did pious things before the people for the sake of appearances, who thought they were initially saved by God's grace but that remaining in the God's covenant people is a matter of one's own moral effort, of keep God's Law and refraining from sin.

Return each day to the repentance that God has granted you for Christ's sake in your Baptism. Die and rise with Christ. For you have been marked for Christ, marked for death with Him and marked for the resurrection with Him. Trust in God's promise given to you in Baptism to forgive you and raise you up on the Last Day; be confident that because God has forgiven you now by grace for the sake of Jesus Christ through faith, that on the last judgment Christ shall pour out the Holy Spirit upon you in full and you shall live!

Trusting in Christ as your righteousness, your good works shall come forth, as an apple tree produces good apples. You will serve your neighbor in love and God will be glorified. You will exchange gifts with people, help the poor and needy, and be kind to people day by day, because God has brought you to repentance. Christ Jesus the LORD, our King has come and He is coming again. Therefore repent, be converted from unbelief and trust in Christ day by day Amen!