

Sermon Draft

Text: Matthew 3:1-12

Sermon: Prepare for Christ: Repent! Live! Bear Fruit!

One of my childhood memories is of spending time helping my father clear a path through the woods so we could put up a fence. It was so narrow that you could barely sneak an old Ford truck with a steel bumper through it. It had stumps along the way and a few low spots where the truck would get stuck because it was all sugar sand. This is also when I got hit in the head with a hammer. My dad and I were putting up fence and my brother was hauling debris. My brother yelled duck and my dad swung the hammer, my head got in the way. We were preparing the property so that we could move there.

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. 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 to be, but rather a people waiting in eager expectation for his arrival to deliver them from sin. John was there to prepare Christ's path.

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 United States.

We have the whole menu of false religions from Islam to Mormons, a huge segment of the population practices no religion, and a significant portion of Christian churches deny central tenets of the faith such as justification by faith alone and the resurrection of the body. 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 this Advent season, we the Church continue John the Baptist's important work in Advent: Prepare Christ's Path.

Our text 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 was **repent**.

Just as Lent is a season of preparation and spiritual refreshment for Christians, so also is Advent. It is a time to quit kidding ourselves about how good and holy we're becoming, honestly recognize our sins, in thought, word, and deed and repent.

John the Baptist did not sugarcoat his condemnation of sinners. As did the prophets of ancient Israel, he told people straight up the deep problem they were in without the grace of God.

Repent does not mean just being contrite or sorry for our sins, but it also encompasses faith, 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, contrition for sin is a dead end.

With his mention of the kingdom of the heavens, John is 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, Advent is a special time for us Christians to repent and call the unbelieving world to repent.

Three simple words that most people, including many Christians, find difficult to say are "I am sorry." When we transgress against God or someone else, we would rather yell, scream, and argue than tell God or that person, "I am 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 confess their sins.

Advent is a time for us to be honest with God and one another by confessing our wrongs, our sin. 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 one another.

The second aspect to preparing Christ's path that's revealed in our Gospel is to ***live in our baptismal grace***. Jews did many ritual washings seeking purity from their sins. For example, some of the remains uncovered at Qumran, near the region where John baptized, include washing pools with steps where you could walk down into the water for ritual cleansing.

John's Baptism was different; it was a one-time washing that brought forgiveness. It was a one-time sharing of God's forgiveness in a very tangible way. Just as people were plunged under the water, they were washed of their sin through Baptism. It was a Baptism that laid the foundation for the Christian Baptism you've 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, we have received the very preaching and Baptism of Jesus. When we were baptized, we received the Holy Spirit, who united us with all the saving work of Christ: his entire obedient life, his death as a payment for sin, and his resurrection victory! Therefore, an important aspect of preparing Christ’s path is simply living in this baptismal grace, claiming and treasuring it, living in its power and peace. Advent is a time to get back to the spiritual basics, and Baptism is one of those spiritual foundations in our lives.

Our Gospel reveals a third aspect to preparing Christ's path. John says, "**Bear the fruit of repentance!**" (v 8). This command sounds rather challenging. John even goes on 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, then how can poor trees like us produce good fruit?

The Holy Spirit works repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, so it is not us who will produce good fruit, but the Holy Spirit whom we have received abundantly in Baptism when we were united with Christ. The fruit we cannot produce by nature—such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—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.

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 them to repent and confess their sins, to be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit, and to bear the fruit of repentance the Holy Spirit produces. Prepare Christ's path to your heart and to the hearts of others.

Amen