

## **Sermon: Making Room**

Blessings on your Advent journey! You know, some folks aren't even aware there is a season called 'Advent.' For them, this season leading up to Christmas is Christmas. We get that message loud and clear everywhere we go, in every store where we shop.

What are we waiting for? Let's cut to the chase and start singing "Silent Night" and get that Baby Jesus into the manger where he belongs!

But we aren't there yet. We'd like to skip over the hard work of Advent if we could, and get right to the presents and eggnog, but here's the reality: getting prepared for Christ to come into our lives takes more than garlands and wreaths, and I think most of us here today know that.

In fact, those garlands and wreaths and presents and all our busy-ness can get in the way of what we really need to be doing right now. which is waiting. I seem to reflect a lot on 'waiting' in my messages.

Advent is, after all, the season of waiting, a time of preparation. It's a time for making room, getting centered around Christ, instead of crowding him out with decorations and gift wrap and rich food. Instead of trying to cram more in, Advent calls us to make more space, more time for Christ to come. To wait.

Little ones might think 18 more days is a long time to wait for Christmas to come, but the people of Israel had been waiting for hundreds of years, in expectation of the Messiah. Prophets had been promising for centuries that God would send a Redeemer.

That kind of longing, that kind of patient expectation, puts our impatience for Christmas to get here in a little different perspective, I think.

As John the Baptist began his ministry, some hoped that perhaps he was the promised Messiah. He certainly spoke with prophetic authority, even if he was a bit strange. After all, he lived out in the wilderness, and he ate whatever he could find. His message was relentless, and he didn't seem to

care if he offended people with his preaching. He was on a mission to make room for the Messiah.

Matthew introduces John early in his gospel, knowing that the story of Jesus had to begin with a prophet preparing the way for the One who was to come. John knew, even if the people who heard him preach did not, that he was not the Promised One. He was eagerly waiting for the prophetic word he preached to be fulfilled. John knew his job was to prepare the way for the Saviour, and that the time was very near.

We heard in our Gospel reading today,

*In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*

*But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 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 don't know about you, but being called a brood of vipers doesn't really make me want to curl up by the Christmas Tree with a cup of hot cocoa. No wonder John had enemies. No wonder his ministry was a short one. He certainly doesn't sugar-coat anything.

"Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near!" he shouts. "Get ready! The Messiah is coming, and you need to be ready! This Messiah you've been waiting for is going to judge the whole world, so you'd better confess your sins and repent of them, before it's too late!"

And yet, even though John's message is harsh, people flocked out to hear him preach. Instead of going to the center of town to stand on his soapbox where more people could hear him, John lives out in the wilderness, in the wild country, where no one wants to go. Yet people from Jerusalem, even

all of Judea, come out to hear him, and to be baptized by this prophet of God.

John's baptism is a curious thing. Like his camel-hair clothing and his diet of bugs and honey, John's baptism just doesn't fit into any idea of "normal."

Of course, John didn't invent baptism. It had been around for a long time. Baptism was a ritual cleansing practice for Gentiles who wished to convert to Judaism. Converts were baptized to signify that they had been purified, and could now enter the temple to worship.

Jews who were born Jews needed no such purification ritual; normal washing and following Kosher laws were enough. But a Gentile coming into the faith was completely immersed, to show that sin had been removed, and the new convert was now acceptable in the temple.

So why were all these Jews going out to the wild lands by the Jordan river – not the cleanest river in the area, mind you – to be baptized by this strange man? They were already practicing Jews. In fact, Matthew tells us that even the Sadducees and Pharisees, the most influential and faithful groups of Jewish leaders, were coming out to hear John and be baptized.

John's baptism was a symbol of repentance, of turning away from sin. The people who came to John to be baptized wanted to be ready when the Messiah came. Like their ancestors, they had fallen into complacency; taking for granted their status as the chosen people of God, going through the motions of ritual worship, without experiencing the presence of God in their lives.

John's preaching had awakened in them a memory of what it meant to be God's people, holy and set apart. John's preaching also awakened in them a hope for the future, and the expectation that the future was nearer than they'd thought.

The Sadducees and Pharisees, as the most religious Jewish leaders, thought their very Jewishness would be enough to save them. John says, "No, you need to repent, too." What's more, John tells us, our lives need to

show evidence that we have turned away from sin, and have turned toward God; 'fruit worthy of repentance' he calls it.

So what does that look like?

One thing that doesn't work is to rely on our spiritual credentials. Just as the Pharisees and Sadducees boasted about being descendants of Abraham, we can easily think that having a strong resumé of church involvement will save us. Or simply showing up every Sunday will make us righteous.

But John tells them that isn't enough. Presumably, relying on any other assurance or past accomplishment than God is not the way to prepare. Inaction is not the way to prepare. Making excuses is not the way to prepare. Being distracted from Jesus' coming kingdom by possessions, prestige, and power is not the way to prepare.

Preparing our hearts for Jesus looks a little different than decorating the Sanctuary with wreaths and poinsettias. Decorations can help us remember the deep truths they represent, but they can also sometimes be the way we cover up the messiness of our lives, the dark places in our hearts.

It has been said that we recognize we often hurt others, especially those closest to us. We know we do not care for the creation that sustains us. We say and do what we ought not and fail to act in ways we know we should. Somewhere in us we long to be held accountable and given the chance to repent and attempt to do and be better.

John the Baptist affords us this opportunity on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent every year. It is a new liturgical year, and God loves us enough to hold us accountable, to be who and whose we are. Jesus is coming and we can be ready to meet him, not perfectly, but honestly, knowing he comes with merciful judgment that frees us to imitate him, haltingly, but surely.

The season of Advent is a time to reflect, to ponder, making room in ourselves for Christ to enter into us, and transform our lives into something

new, something holy. This season is an opportunity for each of us to allow God to work in us. Repenting is how we make room for the new life in Christ that God desires for us.

It doesn't take much, really, to prepare the way of the Lord. Just a turning away from our own desires, as we turn toward God's deep desire for us. That's what repentance is, after all. Turning away from our sinful selves, as we turn toward God's love for us. It doesn't take much space to turn around, but we must do the turning. We must make room. Amen