Do you have the Christmas Spirit?
(Mark 1:1–8)

Do you ever notice that some people seem to have the Christmas spirit, but others just can't seem to get in the mood? Which one are you? Are you the person that goes around singing Christmas carols, always feeling warm and fuzzy? Or, are you just aggravated that the Christmas season is just too overwhelming?

Perhaps the Advent season makes you joyful or perhaps you are just living day to day, not at all excited about Christmas. Why is it that some folks have the Christmas spirit and others do not?

I believe that John the Baptist can help us. He announced to the people of his time that the Christ would be coming soon. "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. John announced that Jesus was coming but he also acknowledged that he was but a servant of God.

For the spirit of God to become real to us we must be willing to humble ourselves and accept the fact that Jesus is greater than ourselves.

John was preaching to a people who were powerless because of an oppressive Roman government. His listeners had no hope, no reason to believe that their lives had any meaning. When John announced that the Lord would be coming, he also said that his listeners would be baptized by the Holy Spirit. In other words, their lives would become filled with the spirit of God and they would be transformed from people without hope to people with hope.

Humility is not always an easy attribute to grasp. It requires emptying oneself, coming to grips with our humanness and our fragile existence.

The spirit of God cannot enter our souls until we are willing to humble ourselves and learn that we are mere mortals, in need of a powerful and eternal God. Unfortunately sometimes, we may have to be in a real low point in our lives before God can get through to us.

John tells his listeners to get ready. Their lives would change; they would become more faithful, more loving and more hopeful. The opportunity for change was close at hand. To take advantage of that opportunity they had to trust in John's word. He was God's messenger, "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness." In addition to humbling themselves they needed to listen.

Back when the telegraph was the fastest method of long-distance communication, a young man applied for a job as a Morse code operator. Answering an ad in the newspaper, he went to the office address that was listed. When he arrived, he entered a large, busy office filled with noise and clatter, including the sound of the telegraph in the background. A sign on the receptionist's counter instructed job applicants to fill out a form and wait until they were summoned to enter the inner office.

The young man filled out his form and sat down with the seven other applicants in the waiting area. After a few minutes, the young man stood up, crossed the room to the door of the inner office, and walked right in.

Naturally the other applicants perked up, wondering what was going on. They muttered among themselves that they hadn't heard any summons yet. They assumed that the young man who went into the office made a mistake and would be disqualified.

Within a few minutes, however, the employer escorted the young man out of the office and said to the other applicants, "Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming, but the job has just been filled." The other applicants began grumbling to each other, and one spoke up saying, "Wait a minute, I don't understand. He was the last to come in, and we never even got a chance to be interviewed. Yet he got the job. That's not fair!"

The employer said, "I'm sorry, but all the time you've been sitting here, the telegraph has been ticking out the following message in Morse code: 'If you understand this message, then come right in. The job is yours.' None of you heard it or understood it. This young man did. The job is his."

All of the applicants (presumably) knew Morse code, or else they would not have bothered applying for the job – but only one of them was awake to what he knew.

All of us know Christ – but we sometimes tune ourselves out, and completely miss him – not recognizing the one standing among us. While we wait then, we must keep ourselves continually tuned to God's still small voice.

Our lives are open to the spirit of God when we are willing to change. John's message was about repentance. Repentance means there is a change of direction.

Take for example Ebenezer Scrooge in A Christmas Carol, by Dickens. He was a stingy, grumpy, mean spirited man whose life was changed after being confronted by the ghosts of the past, present and future. When he saw how hopeless his life turned out he was transformed and became generous and filled with a spirit of love.

A more contemporary story would be the story of How the Grinch Stole Christmas, by Dr. Seuss. The Grinch was totally transformed, his heart growing 3 sizes greater. After being baptized by the spirit he became, kind, warm and generous and returned Christmas to the 'Whos' in 'Whoville'.

I believe that everyone wants to change but we are stuck. We are trapped by our sins of the past or we are distant from God pursuing our own personal agenda. As a result we are never fulfilled or satisfied. Life is nothing more than a treadmill with no way of getting off. The key that can unlock the door to newness and guide us from darkness to light is forgiveness.

John proclaimed a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Forgiveness enables us to move away from the past and embrace the present.

The transformation of the Grinch and Scrooge are classics. In both stories their worlds became a better place. But in both stories there is one story that doesn't get as much attention. It's the fact that the Who's forgave the Grinch and the townspeople and relatives of Scrooge in London forgave him.

Forgiveness, like John the Baptist proclaimed, is at the heart of opening ourselves to God's spirit. The Christmas spirit can become a reality to you when you accept the forgiveness of God for your past, or you are willing to forgive someone else for theirs.

The Holy Spirit gives us new spiritual life. He unites us to Christ as the adopted children of the Father. He sets us apart to God as holy and continues working throughout our life, progressively setting us apart from sin unto righteousness. He endues us with spiritual gifts to be used in God's service.

He seals us forever as God's own redeemed and treasured possession with a divinely administered seal which cannot be broken or violated. The Holy Spirit seals us, keeps us, and preserves us forever in God's family. Amen