

GET READY FOR CHRISTMAS THE RIGHT WAY

If someone from another planet came to earth and watched people in the United States during the month of December, do you think that creature would be scratching his head and wondering what in the world they were doing? I mean, think of what he would see! He would see people cutting down trees and then taking them into their homes and putting lights and other things on them. He would see husbands on their ladders or on the roofs of their houses hanging icicle lights and other decorations with their wives telling them exactly where to put them. He would see people in stores and malls waiting in long lines with their shopping carts or arms full of stuff, looking tired and impatient. He would see parents with their children waiting in a long line so that their children could go and sit on the lap of a guy with a white beard and wearing a red suit, with some of the kids crying because they are scared. He would hear songs about a reindeer by the name of Rudolph having a red, shiny nose and a snowman named Frosty who came alive one day. If he would ask what was going on, the answer he would get is that people are getting ready to celebrate Christmas

We all have to admit that December is a busy month of preparation For us Christians that has to include preparing to celebrate the first arrival of our Savior. Just as we do all kinds of physical things to prepare for Christmas, we also do spiritual things to prepare us to celebrate Christ's birth. Every December we meet someone who teaches us how to be properly prepared. No, it's not Rudolph or Frosty or Santa. It's John the Baptist. The message John preached to prepare the people for Christ's first coming is the same message that will prepare us to celebrate Christmas the right way and prepare us for Christ's second coming. This morning John the Baptist tells us. **GET READY FOR CHRISTMAS THE RIGHT WAY**

Back at Jesus' time, before the days of e-mails and cell phones, kings would send messengers ahead of them to the towns they were going to visit. These messengers were called heralds and their job was to get people ready for the king's arrival. They were to make sure the windy and dangerous dirt roads were straightened and made clear, that there were no detours or road construction going on to hinder the king from entering the town. God called John the Baptist to be his herald, to prepare the people for the coming of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We read this quote from the prophet Isaiah in our text. **A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'** What was he talking about? Isaiah was talking about providing the Lord with a ready and easy access into peoples' hearts and lives; to make straight whatever was not in line with God's holy will; to clear away all obstacles thrown into Jesus' path that would prevent him from entering people's hearts. He was talking about sin. That's why John said. **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."**

What do you think it would have been like to have met John the Baptist? Imagine John knocking on your door one day and saying, "Let's sit down and have a little chat." Would you find that a bit overwhelming? Yea! After all, look who he is. So what would he talk to you about? Would he ask? "Do you have everything done on your to do list for Christmas?" No! His message would be the same as it was back at Jesus' time. Repent. John would tell you that there's something wrong with you; that you need to repent and turn away from your sins.

What would you say in response? Would you maybe say? "Wait a minute. I invite you into my living room to have a nice, friendly conversation about Christmas and you attack me by saying I need to repent and change my ways. You say there's something wrong with me. That's not very kind or nice." John the Baptist would look at you and say. "I disagree with you. I am being kind and nice. Here's why. God wants you to be perfect husbands or wives, perfect parents, perfect sons or daughters, perfect workers, perfect students. He wants you to be perfect in the way you treat others. He wants you to be a perfect church member, perfect in your worship, perfect in your study of God's Word, perfect in your giving, perfect in your prayer life, perfect in the way you

deal with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Does God get what He demands from you? Absolutely not! We are not perfect and that's not okay in God's eyes. Not being perfect means that we are sinful people who deserve God's full wrath and punishment. We deserve to hear God say to us, "Get out of my sight forever!" This is why you need to repent.

John's message never changed, his message being "Repent." The word "repent" has the idea behind it of turning around, of changing direction. John told the people they were going in the wrong direction. On their own, by their own good deeds, they were heading straight for hell. Did the people really like hearing that? Do we? Of course not! Yet, it's only when we recognize our own sinfulness and what we deserve because of our sin that we will see our need for a Savior; that our hearts will be ready to greet our Savior. That's what John was doing. He was preparing the people to meet their Savior King who was about to arrive on the scene and begin his ministry as the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world. John was quick to preach to them the good news that Jesus had come into the world to live and die to pay for all of their sins; that forgiveness would be theirs through faith in this coming Savior. Through this preaching, the Holy Spirit would work repentance in their hearts.

The same is true for us. Because of Jesus' life and death, your sins are gone, washed away and can no longer condemn you. You received that forgiveness when you were baptized and you receive it every time you hear God's forgiveness being pronounced on you; every time you receive Holy Communion. Then because of that forgiveness and out of joy and thanks for that forgiveness, there will be changes in your life. What kind of changes? After being forgiven of being selfish and greedy, you strive to be unselfish and generous. After being forgiven for being quick to anger and impatient, you strive to be patient and gentle. After being forgiven for not being faithful in your church attendance and Holy Communion, you strive to be faithful and make them top priorities in your life. After being forgiven of your sin for not giving joyful, first fruit offerings, you strive to give generous gifts to the Lord for the Gospel ministry of our church. After being forgiven for the sin of gossip, you strive to use your tongue to God's glory and to help others, not hurt them. In other words, we strive to live for Jesus and not for our own selfish flesh. Repentance is a change of mind and heart that leads to a change of life and habits, an attitude that says "I want to follow Jesus by giving him my very best, my very best of my time, abilities and money."

Sounds good, but this is much easier said than done and we all know that. So the questions you might ask John are these. 'How do I find the willingness and the strength to confess my sins to God? How do I find the absolute comfort and confidence that God forgives me of all my sins? How do I find the desire and the strength to turn from my evil ways and change my sinful habits?' Here's John's answer. "You won't find any desire or strength to do any of this in yourselves. But don't despair. **But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.** At John's time, bending down to untie someone's sandals was the work of a lowly slave. John said he was not even worthy to do that for the one coming who was much greater than he, greater than you and me. This someone is the one who would give you the courage and the desire to follow him. This someone is Jesus. He would show he is greater and more powerful by his miracles, by his life and death, by his resurrection from the dead, by the giving of his Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost where 3000 people were brought to faith and baptized, and by the giving of his Holy Spirit who gives us the gifts of faith, hope and love. The Holy Spirit works faith and love in our hearts through the gifts of his holy Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. Through these, the Holy Spirit fills our hearts with Jesus' love and clothes us with Jesus' holiness.

My friends, December is a busy month with all kinds of preparations. As busy as it can be, John the Baptist reminds us this morning to not lose sight of the real reason we celebrate Christmas. We need to make sure that when December 25 rolls around, we are ready to celebrate Christmas the right way. John tells us there is only one way to be ready. Repent. Over all the songs about Frosty and Rudolph and Santa you hear on the radio, listen closely to that voice calling out in the wilderness. Prepare the way for the Lord. Repent. Then on Christmas Day, when you look into that manger, you will see the little baby Jesus who came into this world to

live and die to win your forgiveness and salvation. That sight will lead you to sing out with joy in your hearts. That sight will lead you to find joy in serving and following him. That sight will then lead you to share with others what great things God has done for you and for them. That is how God wants us to celebrate Christmas. Amen.