

Making Preparations

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!" He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said:

The voice of one shouting in the wilderness,
"Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight."

John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him. As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John. He said to them, "You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire. I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I'm not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out."

Mt. 3:1-12 (C.E.B.)

*Dear God, you know what is growing in our hearts. Help us look at what is in our hearts, and help us make room there for you. Amen.*¹

Last week, we finished putting up Christmas decorations at our house. We started on the day after Thanksgiving, but it took us more than one day to finish. (And while Ronda may still surprise me with more things to put out, I think I'm done.) It's part of an annual tradition that many people practice, making our homes and our communities a more festive place to live as we participate in various Christmas celebrations.

Some people add so many lights it feels as though they are trying to completely dispel the darkness of the shorter days and longer nights. I am not that person, by the way. I simply like to let people know we are celebrating.

How many of you have decorated for Christmas?

It won't be long and there will be wrapped presents under the tree, adding to the decorations. And then there will be the parties. Parties with the people in the offices where we work. Parties with friends and neighbors. Parties at church and at school.

And some of us will become so involved with the going and the preparing that we miss the season of Advent.

¹ Prayer adapted from the children's time script, "A Shepherd Remembers," *Leader (Worship Resources)*. Fall 2002

Seriously, how many hours have we spent preparing for Christmas – including the decorating and the cooking and the baking and the shopping and the partying? It might be hard to add up all of that time, but I suspect it's much more time than we might estimate.

Maybe a better question to ask is: How much time have we spent preparing for Christ? That is what Advent is about, after all, preparing for Christ to appear.

- In what ways do we make room for him in our homes?
- We have events planned, but how are we making room for Christ in our Church?
- Where do we make room for him in our society?

John the Baptist asks similar questions. He asks people how they are preparing for the Messiah. He reminds them what the prophets told them about the coming King; he reminds us that the scriptures make it clear that preparations must be made for him to come, including making the roads straight (Mt. 3:3).

John suggests that one of the marks of the people of God is a people who are making a path for the Messiah to walk—a path in society as well as in our own lives.

His message is a startling warning to those of us who have not prepared for Christ with as much enthusiasm as we have prepared for Christmas. We haven't left any room in the inn with all of our busyness. We are too busy making plans and having parties and singing songs to think about how ready we are for Christ.

So maybe this year, we should start by asking a different set of questions.

- What if we looked at what things we no longer need?
- What is making it hard to celebrate Christmas?
- What is making it difficult to invite Christ into our homes, our hearts, our community?
- Could we find a way to discard some things while clinging to others?

I'm not suggesting we go willy-nilly and throw everything out. I am suggesting we could be more methodical – I am a Methodist, after all – and spend time evaluating our lives to determine what is necessary and what is excessive. And while it might take more than a month to do that, I suspect we'd find it worth the effort.

Thirty-one years ago, Ronda and I had a wonderful surprise happen. We received a phone call asking us if we could take a newborn infant as a foster child. We were told there was the possibility of adoption, but the more pressing question at the moment was: Can we find room for a newborn foster child in our home?

We said yes; and they gave us two whole days to prepare our home and our lives.

I didn't think much about it until a year later when we were helping our daughter prepare for her first child. Tonya had nine months to plan and prepare for a child in her home. By the time Keith was born, they had furniture and clothes and bottles and diapers and diaper bags and toys. They even had a crib and a room ready for him when he came home from the Hospital.

We had none of that for Melissa.

Tonya and Ed attended Lamaze classes and learned about the birthing process and began to talk about some of the things to expect in their lives after the baby was born. Ed took a few days off

work to be at home with Keith when he was born, and I suspect that had Tonya been employed she would have taken maternity leave.

In stark contrast, Ronda and I both had to be at work the next morning. You see, there is no parental leave for foster parents. We had two days to find a babysitter who would take a newborn and we were off and running.

There was a remarkable difference between the two days we had and the nine months of preparation Tonya had. I didn't realize what we had missed until I saw it happen to someone else.

But I also wonder if we do the same thing with the Christ child at Christmas.

- Do we allow for a time of pregnancy?
- Do we take time to rearrange our lives so there is room for Christ?
- Do we intentionally discard those things that hinder his ability to walk with us?

I suspect many people prefer to rush into the birthing room at Christmas, having a baby before making room for it in their lives. It might be a stretch of the metaphor, but I know people who induce labor if they can't find time to celebrate at the correct time.

It's easy to spend so much time preparing for Christmas that we forget the baby is coming. And what is more tragic is that with the Christ child we also tend to forget about the child after his birth. Any parent will tell you that parenthood only *begins* at birth. It never ends.

John the Baptist tells us that we need to prepare for Christ – the fully grown Christ (not just the baby), the One who will change our lives– and that the preparations will require some life-style changes. In fact, he says the only way to prepare for Christ is to repent (Mt. 3:2).

In his comments on the text, Charles Aaron points out that²

The harsh, no-nonsense John, whose overall message certainly contains judgment actually teaches the contemporary church a needed message about repentance. Repentance arises not so much out of fear of punishment as it does out of the sense of passion about the nearness of the kingdom of heaven. Sinners repent in order to participate in what God does in bringing near the kingdom.

Let me repeat that. “Repentance arises not so much out of fear of punishment as it does out of the sense of passion about the nearness of the kingdom of heaven. Sinners need to repent in order to participate in .. the kingdom of heaven.” John is telling us we need to change the way we are living; we must repent of our busy-ness and find time in our busy schedules for God.

We must realize that the Christ child will demand some of our energy after birth and that we must continue to nurture our faith throughout our lives, not just at Christmas, not just at the time of our acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior, not just on Sunday morning.

All of life will be affected by Christ.

The Sadducees and Pharisees were the respected religious leaders of John's day. They were the pastors and the deacons, the Sunday School teachers and the church officers of the Jewish

² Jarvis, p. 37

synagogue. They didn't always agree with one another in their theology or their understanding of faith, but they were the ones people respected.

And they were not much different than most of us.

To them, to us, John sends a special warning (Mt. 3:9):

- Don't think that just because you are a member of the church that you are exempt.
- Don't think that just because you have been baptized that you are above reproach.
- Don't think that just because you attend church regularly that God will honor you.

The real question is not how you live your lives, but who lives within you. Is there room for Christ in your life? Is there room for God in your lifestyle? Do you honor God in all that you do?

If not, what do you need to discard to make room for him?

I must confess that all-too-easily I fail to make room in my schedule and in my life for Christ. All-too-often my life is wrapped up in preparing for church, preparing for worship, preparing for Christmas – so much so that it's easy to miss Christ, to forget to look for God in the process of celebrating.

So I, too, am warned by John.

And I suspect that in many ways you are like me. I suspect that you may be so busy preparing for Christmas that you might forget about Christ. And to us John the Baptist says, "Repent. Change the way you are living." We need to repent in order to participate in the kingdom of heaven.

Perhaps Advent could become a time of preparation, to serve as a time of pregnancy in which we can make preparations for Christ, not just Christmas.

We could use the rest of this month to reorganize our lives so that with the coming year we will be able to make commitments to God that we will be able to keep. Maybe we need a longer season than Advent to accomplish the task, but this might be a good time to start.

Do what is important to you as you prepare for Christmas. Decorate your homes. Attend parties. Host parties. Give and receive gifts. But don't get so spread out that you don't leave room for Christ.

Let's work together so we can all prepare for Christ while we prepare for Christmas. Together we can make preparations for the birth of the Christ child in our world and in our lives.

As I was working on this sermon, I realized that my arrival as an interim pastor came very much like our daughter Melissa arrived – with little to no advance preparation. And, just like it happened with Melissa, it has been good. Imagine how much better it could have been if we had time to prepare!

As we look toward the new year, we will engage in a longer season of preparation and begin the search process for a permanent pastor. And like many pregnancies, it may include some difficulties. But there is no doubt in my mind it will be worth the effort, that we will be better prepared for the person God wants to send our way because we have invested our energies in making preparations.

As you make preparations for Christmas this year, I invite you to also keep your eyes open for Christ who is longing to be seen among us – not only at Christmas, but during Advent; not only in the church, but also in our hearts.

Amen.

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