

December 9, 2018 – Luke 3:1-14

Don't look now, but we are 16 days away from Christmas. Just a couple of weeks. And in the world, this is a very busy time. A time for dragging out the Christmas decorations, putting up the lights, purchasing gifts, sending out cards. This is how the world asks us to prepare for Christmas.

We in the church do a certain amount of that too. You've probably noticed the lovely decorations adorning our sanctuary today. Our manger scene out in the front yard. These sorts of things are all well and good.

But the season of advent isn't simply the season of decorations and shopping like it is in the world. In the church, the season of advent is when we prepare to meet Jesus. And, oddly enough, the way the church has done this for centuries is by having you meet... his cousin, John. John the Baptizer. John the Baptist. The voice of one crying in the wilderness.

It is both conspicuous and far more than coincidental that every single gospel account includes John. And every time John appears he points you to Jesus. That's his job. That's his whole reason for existing. And the Jesus that John shows us is not always the Jesus we expect to see.

I suppose that's not terribly surprising. Even in his own day, John was wild-eyed and abrasive. A desert wanderer dressed in goatskin. Spouting off visions of fire and brimstone.

*“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ... Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire... His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

John's message is blunt and brutal. But it's not meant to turn people away. No, quite the opposite. This voice of God's wrath crying out in the wilderness is inviting people. Calling them to come.

Come and prepare yourself for the coming of the Lord. Come and turn away from your sin. Come and be baptized. Come and prepare for Jesus.

But notice something... John doesn't say, “prepare for Christmas.” No, he says “prepare for Jesus.” And there's a difference. A big difference. The difference between preparing for a day and preparing for a person.

I've known people who are great at preparing for Christmas. They can get the house cleaned and decorated and in order... for a day. They can get their busy schedule and their hectic life quieted... for a day.

They can even make peace with their enemies. Smooth over their relationships with coworkers they don't particularly like. And with family members that they judge daily for their horrible life choices. They can be cordial, hospitable, dare I say even act like Christians... for a day. I mean, after all, it's only 24 hours. It will be here and then gone and then life can return to all its sinful normality.

But when you prepare for a person. Well, that's different. Especially when that person is not here and then gone, but coming to stay. Coming to invite you into his kingdom and use you – your words, your thoughts, your actions – in his eternal plan to save this whole fallen world.

Getting ready for that person is different because when that person comes, and comes to stay, your whole life changes. Your moral messiness, your blind busyness, your broken relationships, these things need to change and change for good. Why? Well, consider the person who's coming.

Notice how John describes this one who is to come. This is not a meek, gentle Jesus we see here. This is not a God who says, “Aw, don't worry about your sin. Everybody does it. I'm just glad that you're here.”

“No,” John says a few verses after our reading, “If you think I’m intimidating, just think... the one who comes after me will be even more powerful than I am.” Jesus will not be more gentle, more understanding, more tolerant than John was.

No, he’ll be the exact opposite. John terrified people with his call to repentance. But he was just a man. He had no authority behind his words. No power to back them up.

Jesus comes with the same message as John. But he speaks as one with authority. With the power to judge and forgive. With the power to cast out demons and calm the storms. With the power to baptize with both water and the Holy Spirit. And when he does it, all the people, even his own disciples, are terrified. The fear of the Lord is a very real thing, and Jesus brings it.

And yet, just as quickly as he appears with power over sin, death, and the devil, so too, just as quickly, his power disappears in suffering. He is betrayed by one of his own. Beaten by Roman soldiers. And hung up to die. His disciples want a display of his power and glory, but what they get is a dead man hanging on a cross.

And there, on the cross, abandoned by his people, abandoned by his God, this one more powerful than than John, dies. And he dies for what we have done. Our moral messiness. Our blind busyness. Our broken relationships. That is why Jesus dies.

St Paul describes this as the power of God made known in weakness. Jesus is the only one strong enough to endure your eternal punishment for sin. Jesus bears the wrath and anger of God and leaves you this promise: “I forgive you.”

This man who died for you did not stay dead, of course. But even when he rises, even when he returns to power and glory, he promises to rule over all things for you. To bring you into his kingdom and use you to share his love until the day when he will come. When he will return from the heavens and bring about a new creation. A kingdom that shall never pass away.

So, what are you doing for Christmas? What is your busy preparation? Presents? Lights? Family gatherings? Whatever you’re doing, when it comes to Christmas, don’t forget John. Because John brings us to Jesus.

And John tells you to prepare, not for a day, but for a person. He stands before you with that strange clothing and that fiery message so that you prepare not for a single sentimental moment holding candles in a dark church singing Silent Night, but so that you prepare for eternity. John prepares you to meet Jesus and the eternal life that Jesus has prepared for you.

Regardless of what you are doing for Christmas, John reminds you of what God is doing. He is coming into this world. Not in power and glory. But in a humble baby. Born in a stable.

And he is washing you clean. Again, not in power and glory. But in simple water and simple words. Which, like that tiny baby, disguise all the power and glory of God.

And he is working in your life. Again, not always in power and glory. Often when God works in us, it is in ways that are simple and humble and disguised by our human weakness. So that we are left waiting. Hoping. Trusting in the one who died for us.

Trusting that in his weakness, and in our weakness, there is power. Trusting that in his promise for us, there is fulfillment. Trusting that in his dying, there is a grace that is stronger than than sin and a life stronger than death.

Trusting that like John, we also are a voice of one calling in the wilderness. Preparing the way for the Lord. And, through us, all people will see God’s salvation. Amen.