

Why do we use blue paraments at Advent? If you're not familiar with the term, paraments are the small banners we hang on the pulpit, lectern, and altar, as well as my stole. The different colors mark the different seasons of the church year. Most have a some kind of symbolic significance. We use red at Pentecost to symbolize the tongues of fire on the heads of the apostles. We use white at Easter to symbolize the end of the darkness of death.

So why blue at Advent? Well, as it turns out, not every congregation uses blue. And, in fact, many have only started using blue in the last fifty years or so. Do any of you remember growing up in a church that used purple for Advent?

Until recently, that was actually the more common color. You used purple at both Advent and Lent. The switch to blue at Advent happened for two reasons. First, because Swedish Lutheran Churches used blue instead of purple for Advent and Lent from the very beginning. And since a lot of Swedish Lutherans immigrated to the Midwest, there were a lot of blue paraments around. And second, the color blue has always been associated with the virgin Mary. And we talk a lot about Mary during Advent.

So the switch kinda makes sense. Blue for Advent. Purple for Lent. The problem is that you actually lose a little something when you do that. Because the reason Advent and Lent involved purple decorations was that purple symbolized repentance. And both Advent and Lent are penitential seasons. They are to be times of repentance for the Church.

Have you ever thought of Advent like that? Being a time of repentance? When we think about Advent, we normally think about it as a time of preparation. The king is arriving. Christ is coming to earth. The first time, as a baby in a stable. The second time, on the clouds of glory to judge the living and the dead. That's what Advent's all about. Preparing for Christ to come.

And yet, it's easy to get caught up in human notions of preparation. To us, preparing for Christmas means being busy. Doing exactly what we did in church yesterday: decorating! Decorating our church. Decorating our houses. Buying presents. Taking pictures. Sending cards. Busy, busy, busy.

And yet, none of that is God's definition of preparing for Christmas. No, God gave us his definition. He gave us *"the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'"*

You wanna know how to prepare for Christmas, you look to the one sent with that exact mission. John the Baptist was born for one purpose: to prepare us for the coming of our Savior. And how did John prepare us? Well, by putting up purple paraments, figuratively speaking. *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*

"But Pastor," I can hear you thinking, "Repentance isn't very... festive." Let me tell you, it wasn't very festive for John the Baptist, either. In fact, there was nothing 'festive' about John. I mean, look at him. He wore camel's hair and leather. He ate locusts and wild honey. He lived in the wilderness.

And he was not exactly personable. You don't make a lot of friends by shouting at complete strangers, *"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"* Especially when those people are some of the most respected teachers and spiritual leaders in the nation.

John was not a big fan of social custom. And so if he looks a little out of place in our Christmas preparations, that's actually a good thing. He looked out of place in his own neighborhood. He's supposed to look out of place. Because he's got a very out of place message to deliver.

God is cutting down his tree. The tree of Jesse. The one we heard about in our Old Testament lesson. God is chopping it down. And the axe was already striking it's roots. Cutting it down for failing to bear good fruit. Throwing it into the fire because it was diseased and corrupt and dead.

He's talking about the Jewish people. The Israelites who had for so long been his beloved children. God is cutting down their tree. But, as I said in my children's message, it's not because he doesn't care about them anymore. It's because he knows that the only way a new shoot can grow is if it comes from the stump of the old tree.

And John is a part of that process. His words are harsh because they are the very blade of the axe cutting into the heart of God's people. John's job is not to be comforting. It's to be condemning.

To show them exactly how little good fruit they were producing. How sin and corruption had filled their lives. How they had become obsessed with greed and pride and self-righteousness.

And he attacks the Pharisees and Sadducees most of all because they are the ones who should know better. *"Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"* These are Israel's theologians and scholars. They know God's Word better than anyone else. They should see their own sin better than anyone.

But they are oblivious to what they are doing. They are oblivious to what God's chosen nation has become. So much so that John is convinced that the only reason they would ever possibly come out to listen to him is if someone else had clued them in. Because they would never figure it out on their own.

But John isn't just yelling at the people. He's preaching a message of repentance. And with that message comes a baptism of repentance. A symbolic baptism. A baptism that says, "Yes God, I know I have failed. I know I have been dead wood. I know I have been part of the chaff and not part of the wheat. I know I am the reason you are judging your people. But please forgive me. Wash me clean of my sin like this water washes me clean of dirt."

Makes sense. It's what a lot of churches today preach, in fact. But it's not complete. And John knows it. *"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."*

John's purpose is preparation. His mission is to make people ready for the Savior. To make us ready for Christmas. But once that mission is finished – once Christmas comes, once the Savior is here – repentance alone isn't enough.

Because the truth is that you can repent and repent and repent and none of it will matter, if God says, "No. I don't forgive you. And no amount of begging on your part will convince me otherwise. You will be cut down. You will be burned with unquenchable fire. Period. End of story."

Repentance is meaningless without a God whose listening. And loving. And forgiving. Without a God who is willing to come to earth and die for us. Repentance is meaningless without a Savior.

Which is why we don't preach a baptism of repentance. We don't preach a baptism where you have to confess your sins and ask to be forgiven and then you're symbolically washed with water. Because our repentance isn't the point. Repentance is just a preparation.

We are done with baptisms of preparation. Because Christ has come. And He has promised us forgiveness of sins, through the Holy Spirit. And so we baptize not symbolically but with the real thing. We baptize with the Holy Spirit and with the Spirit's fire. Just as Christ commanded us to do so.

We baptize not to repent. But to forgive. And to assure us that no matter how often we may fail to bear good fruit. No matter how often we have looked like chaff instead of wheat. No matter how often we deserved to be cut down and thrown into the flames. We are still God's forgiven people.

A branch grafted onto the new tree from the stump of Jesse. Part of the family of God. And heirs to a world of justice and righteousness. Where peace will reign even over the wolf who dwells with the lamb, over the leopard who lies down with the young goat, over the lion who sits together with the fattened calf. And where all the earth is filled with the knowledge of the Lord.

And so we prepare. And we repent. Not because they are the goals, but because they help us to appreciate what is to come. We make ourselves ready for the king. Not because we're really able. But because we're called to do so. We prepare so that the Lord might straighten His path to our heart this Christmas. We repent so that we come with gratitude for all that our Savior has done for us. Amen.