

Prepare the Way of the Lord

It's Advent. You know that. Not only because the paraments are purple but also because there's an Advent wreath. You know it's Advent because John the Baptist shows up! Just when you might be preparing to have a jolly Christmas, belting out a friendly "Merry Christmas!" to people you meet, along comes John, and suddenly all the fun – all the joy gets sucked right out of the season!

John is the great buzz kill of holiday cheer. He's kryptonite to the Christmas spirit. He spoils the Christmas party. John is edgy. Prophetic. He is the forerunner. The way-preparer! The messenger who goes before the Lord like a bulldozer or front-end loader to fill in the valleys, level the mountains, straighten out the crooked and smooth over the rough.

John stands on the threshold of history as the last of the OT prophets and the first of the NT evangelists. He comes as a prophetic voice calling out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord."

But what does that mean? In a word, it's the great word of Advent and the entire Christian life. It's spelled R-E-P-E-N-T. In other words, turn away from your sin. Die to it, and return to the Lord your God who has returned to you in Jesus. Repent. You were going the wrong way – the way of hell. Now go the right way – the way to heaven. Repent. Die to the dangerous and deadly belief that you can bribe and butter God up or put Him in a headlock with all your pieties and religiosity. Repent of that. Repent of the evil that you've done. Repent of good that you haven't done. Repent. Set aside your notions of self-esteem and self-love and learn to see yourself as the lost and condemned sinner that you are in Adam and apart from Jesus.

Repent and be baptised. That's what John was calling for! Baptism! That was a new thing! Baptism was unheard of in Israel. There were washings, of course, but none that were done on you or to you by another. There were all kinds of sacrifices for sin, but not a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

So, what's John up to? Or rather, what's the Lord up to with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins in the desert? Here's the answer. Through John, God calls Israel back to Jordan, which once parted upon their entry into the Promised Land. Working in the wilderness recalls the 40 years of Israel's wilderness wanderings, during which God formed Israel as His chosen people and a holy nation. So, when John shows up, God is having for Himself a new Israel.

And for that, His new Israel needs to be cleansed. They need to be repented, and then they need to be bathed in His divine forgiveness. Sinful hearts scrubbed clean in the baptismal bath of the Jordan joined to the promise of God. By the way, repentance and baptism go together, even for you. You are repented by being baptised in the Triune Name (Matt. 28). In addition, living in and from your baptism is living a life of daily being repented, faithed and led in holy living by the Lord (Rom. 6).

John minces no words. He's quite blunt. When people come out to him to be baptised, he calls them a brood of poisonous snakes! Who warned them to flee from the wrath to come? What are they doing here? Oh my! That's hardly a way to have a church. Right? Then, John cuts through all the religious self-justification clutter. Don't credential yourselves by saying, "We have Abraham as our father." Don't try to play those trump cards. God couldn't care less. He doesn't give a flying flip about your bonafides. If He wanted, He could turn stones into children of Abraham.

You know it's Advent because John proclaims judgment. No holds barred, just ham-fisted judgment. The axe was already whacking away at the Israelite rootstock. The fire was already stoked. Any tree that did not bear good fruit would be cut down by the axe of God's judgment and thrown into the fire.

This was not some call to abstract repentance, either. This was a call to a genuine turning of the heart with the anticipation of works that flow from repentance. When the people asked John, "Therefore, what are we to do?" John told them. He got down to specifics. He didn't say, "Oh, you're a sinner; you can't do them, so don't bother trying." He didn't say, "You're justified by faith, so forget about works." He told them what the fruit of repentance looked like. You share your clothing with one who has none. You share your food with one who has none. You do your vocations honestly and with integrity. Tax collectors – collect no more than the fair tax. Soldiers – do not use your authority to extort money, and be content with your wages. In other words, fulfil your God-given callings with honesty, integrity, and uprightness.

John would say to us, "You brood of Lutheran lizards. Repent! Repent of your complacency, excuses, laziness, and religious hypocrisy. And don't you dare say, 'We have Luther as our father,' because men like Luther come a dime a dozen in God's economy of doing things. And Luther can't save you any more than Abraham can. So, repent. Repent of your shallow prayers, your superficial devotions, your endless complaining and whining; repent of your ingratitude for God's Word preached and taught; repent of your indifference to Christ's Body and the Blood offered in the Supper.

Repent and throw away all the idols of your heart that won't let you have a Sabbath Day rest – EVER! Repent from the heart! And worship Jesus only!" That's ultimately what John's up to today at the Jordan in the wilderness. And while I'm at it, let me say this. Repentance is not a one-time thing. It's a way of life. Repentance is what it means to be a Christian. Daily, the old sinful nature called the old Adam must be drowned and die with all its sin and evil desires. Daily, the new man spelled F-A-I-T-H is to rise up to live in Christ, clothed with His righteousness, covered with His holiness, living in His perfection. That's living in and from your baptism.

In addition, repentance is something God works on us through His Word, and we shouldn't be surprised when He does it. Neither should we avoid it because it makes us "feel bad about ourselves." You're supposed to feel bad about yourself. After all, St. Paul says, "I know that in me, that is, in my [sinful] flesh, dwells no good thing" (Rom. 7:18). Nothing in your sinful nature would make you feel good about yourself. So, today, through John, God sends the bulldozer of His Law right down the main streets of our lives. The highway of the Lord runs right through the middle of our being, through our very hearts and minds. That's why the encounter with John today and all our lives are so uncomfortable. We see the truth about sinful selves, and we don't like what we see.

This is the harsh side of Advent. This is what makes it a sombre and sober season even as the world parties on. We encounter John in all his prophetic edginess and realise that we are sinful and unclean. Our thoughts, desires, and actions – even the best and most noble of them – are hopelessly in need of a bath given by Jesus. We recognise this. You do. After a day of work, you feel like you need a bath; you need to get clean again. There isn't a day spent in your vocations as fathers, mothers, citizens, workers – whatever God has given you to do – that you are not in need of a baptismal bath of repentance, a washing of water with the Word.

Fortunately for us, and blessedly, baptism, like repentance, is not a one-time thing. It has meaning every day of our lives. It is a daily gift. It is a daily working of God's Word in our lives, killing us and making us alive. Cleansing us so that we can serve God and serve our neighbour in our vocations. Not to get saved but because we are saved by God's undeserved kindness and mercy in Jesus, His Son.

John came to prepare the way of the Lord Jesus. John's baptism of repentance came to its completion and fulfilment when Jesus stepped into the Jordan to be baptised as a sinner, to stand with us and in our place. The axe that was laid to the root of Israel fell upon Jesus. The wrath of God that threatens our damnation fell upon Jesus. The fire of God's judgment against our sin came upon Jesus. Jesus is the good tree that bears the good fruit on behalf of all of humanity.

Grafted to Him in baptismal faith, joined to Jesus as branches to a living Vine, feeding off His death and life, you are a good tree, too. "Make the tree good," Jesus said, "and the fruit will be good also." First the tree, then the fruit. Get the repentance right, and the fruits of repentance will surely be there. And where there is repentance, where men and women recognise their sinfulness and confess it, where hearts are turned by the Spirit working through the Word, there a smooth and level highway is prepared for the Lord.

Since it is Advent, it's time to prepare. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make His paths straight. Don't be afraid of John or his harsh preaching or his baptism. He is a good and faithful preacher who seeks your salvation. He wants you to turn from your sin and then in your heart turn to Christ who comes to you, now hidden in His Word and bread and wine, and soon, I hope very soon, He will come to you in glory. Get ready. The Lord is near!