



from the desk of . . .

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Advent

GETTING READY FOR JESUS

Luke 3:1-16

I want to begin this morning by asking you ... how do you get ready for Christmas? ... I'm sure we all have our routines & schedules of things that need to be done.

2 of my granddaughters get ready for Christmas by preparing extensive lists of "suggested" gift items that the family can get them ...

then hand them out on Thanksgiving Day.

A few years ago a survey was taken of 1,000 people asking how they spent their time in getting ready for Christmas. The results were quite interesting.

- 2 hours & 10 minutes each week was spent making holiday related plans, such as what parties to attend, what to wear, & what time to arrive & leave
- 6 hours & 20 minutes each week was spent planning holiday purchases, & 9 hours shopping for them, with an average of 3 trips to the same store
- 7½ hours were spent baking & preparing the holiday meals

- While less than 4 hours was devoted to relaxation
- And perhaps, most disturbing of all, on Christmas morning, the average parent spent just 9 minutes playing with their children

So, how do you get ready for Christmas? ...

Listen now to Good News from Luke, to you who have gathered here at Community Church for worship.

Within your hearing comes the Word of the Lord ...

(X) It was the fifteenth year of the rule of Emperor Tiberius; Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip was ruler of the territory of Iturea and Trachonitis; Lysanias was ruler of Abilene, and Annas and Caiaphas were High Priests. At that time the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. So John went throughout the whole territory of the Jordan River, preaching, "Turn away from your sins and be baptized, and God will forgive your sins." As it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah:

"Someone is shouting in the desert;

'Get the road ready for the Lord;

make a straight path for him to travel!

Every valley must be filled up,

every hill and mountain leveled off.

The winding roads must be made straight,

and the rough paths made smooth.

The whole human race will see God's salvation!"

Crowds of people came out to John to be baptized by him. "You snakes!" he said to them. "Who told you that you could escape from the punishment God is about to send? Do those things that will show that you have turned from your sins. And don't start saying among yourselves that Abraham is your ancestor. I tell you that God can take these rocks and make descendants for Abraham! The ax is ready to cut down the trees at the roots; every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire."

The people asked him, "What are we to do, then?"

He answered, "Whoever has two shirts must give one to the man who has none, and whoever has food must share it."

Some tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what are we to do?"

"Don't collect more than is legal," he told them.

Some soldiers also asked him, "What about us? What are we to do?"

He said to them, "Don't take money from anyone by force or accuse anyone falsely. Be content with your pay."

People's hopes began to rise, and they began to wonder whether John perhaps might be the Messiah.

So John said to all of them, "I baptize you with water, but someone is coming who is much greater than I am. I am not good enough even to untie his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Luke 3:1-16)

May the Lord grant that we may engage in contemplating the mysteries of His Heavenly wisdom with really increasing devotion, to His glory and to our edification. Amen

(X) How do we get ready for Christmas? ... It seems like I hear more complaints each year about how the real "reason for the season" somehow got lost ... & next year, hey, it's-gonna-be-different!

Well, most stores have been getting ready for Christmas since before Halloween. Businesses get ready for Christmas by planning parties & deciding what days they're going to shut down for the holiday.

Families get ready by decorating their homes with trees & lights & festive garland.

(In fact, as far as I'm concerned, that's the only enjoyable thing about it getting dark so early ... seeing all the Christmas lights in people's yards & roofs.)

I know that a # of you, 2 weeks ago, helped get this building, inside & out,
ready to reflect the joy of the season. Thank you.

In addition there's a lot to get ready for here at Church throughout the month of December. Be it the Dinner Theatre, Christmas tree sales, the women's Christmas program, music rehearsals, caroling,
plus special offerings to help those in need.

But in 2016 followers of Jesus & Churches are facing a difficult dilemma ...
because this year, Christmas falls on ... Sunday.

There's a ministers' website that I get regular e-mails from. And a couple weeks ago one of the Pastors posed a question ... "Christmas is on Sunday this year. Is your Church doing anything different to accommodate the families in your fellowship?"

One Pastor responded ...

"I had hoped that our leaders might have considered simply holding our traditional Christmas Eve service Saturday night ... & then not having a Sunday service. But that wasn't received positively, so we'll do both."

Another stated ...

"We're not having any services on Sunday the 25th - we're shifting it to Friday, the 23rd - & having a Christmas Worship Extrava-palooza. We're having skits, dancing people, traditional hymns, special music, & even Communion - along with a Christmas message."

Now to be honest, both those responses troubled me.

Since I've been a Pastor, there has never been an occasion where the Churches I've served, didn't have a Sunday morning worship service.

Now, to be fair, there must have been some reasons why those 2 Pastors were considering changes to their normal Sunday routine:

- They were concerned that people wouldn't show up
- They realized their members had other priorities
- They believed it was inconvenient to worship on Christmas morning
- Or maybe, they had other plans & didn't want to go to Church on Christmas morning themselves

Of course, they offered some "lame" excuses in defense to their casual approach to worshipping God ... even attempting to cite a few Scriptures to justify the idea that we don't have to be in Church on Sunday to worship. But ultimately the reasons behind their decision were less about theology than they were about convenience.

Now, their excuses might have some legitimacy if they didn't regularly meet every other Sunday. Or if they called off worship so that their members could spend time with their families on other important holidays like Easter, the 4th of July, or Memorial Day weekend ... but I doubt any of them would ever consider doing anything like that.

It's only Christmas that gets this special kind of treatment. Why? ... Because, that which was most "convenient" for them, was at the top of their decision-making process.

I'd really enjoy sitting down with those Pastors & give them a "Theology 101" course. The message of Christmas is not one of **convenience** but of **cost**. Let's consider ...

- It cost Mary & Joseph the comforts of home to take the long journey to Bethlehem while she was "very" pregnant with child (Luke 2:5)
- It cost the shepherds their comfort by the warm campfire to venture out & look for this newborn baby ... & then the conviction to go tell others the Good News (Luke 2:17)
- It cost the Magi a long, long journey & expensive gifts (Matthew 2:1,11)

And ultimately ...

- It cost the Apostles & the early Church persecution & sometimes death (Matthew 5:11)
- It cost missionaries of Christ untold suffering & loss to spread the Good News
- It cost Christian martyrs of all ages their lives for the sake of Christ (Hebrews 11:35-37)

But more than all that ...

- It cost God the Father His own Son (John 3:16) ... just ponder that thought for a moment ...
we gloss over that truth way too easily
- It cost Jesus a life of sacrifice & service ...
& a cruel & horrible death (Luke 22:42)

The Christmas message is ultimately one of cost ... not convenience. In fact, that was at the very heart of John the baptizer's message ... & it certainly was costly to him. He was thrown into prison & a short time later, beheaded. (Mark 6:27)

But John was chosen to get things ready for Jesus.

That was his job. So, just how did he do it?

Well, "John went throughout the whole territory of the Jordan River, preaching, 'Turn away from your sins.'"

In other words ... he went out & told people that they needed to change their lifestyle. And he didn't pull any punches about it. "Do those things that will show that you have turned from your sins."

The enthusiastic crowd responded ...

"Just what do you mean, John?" "What are we to do?"

4 Pastors regularly met for fellowship & support. During their time together one of them remarked ...

"Our people come to us & pour out their hearts, & confess their sins & their needs. Confession is good for the soul. Let's do the same with each other."

One confessed that he had a gambling problem,
& would sneak off to a casino whenever he had a chance.

The 2nd confessed about his struggle with lust,
& looking at pornography on the internet.

The 3rd one confessed to materialism,
& how he always had to buy the newest thing.

When it came to the 4th Pastor, he remained silent.
So the others began to press him. Finally he responded,
"My sin is gossiping ... & I can't wait to get out of here
& tell somebody everything I've just heard!" ...

Well, the old word "repent" is an **action** word.
There's more to it than just saying ... "Jesus, here's my
sin. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Amen"
& then going on our way.

The word "repent" illustrates the fact that we're
going in one direction ... & then we do an about-face & go
in the opposite direction.

It is literally ... "turning away from our sins."

And John deals with 3 specific examples here. And
to completely understand what he's getting at we have to
do a little backtracking.

To one group he says ... "Whoever has 2 shirts must
give one to the man who has none, & whoever has food
must share it." So we backtrack, what was their sin? ...

My guess is ... selfishness & lack of charity.

Then some tax collectors showed up. Now you understand, in that culture, tax collectors were the lowest of the low. I mean when people are talking about the scum of society they say "tax collectors & sinners."

(Luke 7:34)

It just kind of automatically rolls out of their mouths.

So they ask, "What sins do we need to turn away from?" And John responds ... "Don't collect more than is legal." In other words ... quit stealing from the people.

And finally there were also some soldiers there, & The Holy Spirit spoke to them through John's preaching.

"What about us? What are we to do?"

Well, evidently they were oppressing the Jews, & lying, & envious. So John lays it right on the table.

"Don't take money from anyone by force or accuse anyone falsely. Be content with your pay."

Sin keeps a person away from God. (Genesis 3:8) And John's job was getting people ready to receive Him. So he told all of them, very clearly, that ...

- you need to repent
- you need to change
- you need to share with others
- you need to give to others
- you need to live a holy life

That's how John got the people of his day ready for Jesus.

So, how can we get ready for Him this Christmas?

Well 1st, it's all about **where** we go. In getting ready for Christmas, people will go to all kinds of places. They'll go to Target, or the Mall, or to Walmart to buy gifts. They'll go to Menards or Home Depot to buy extension cords & decorations. They'll go to grocery stores for food for their holiday events. People will go to all kinds of places to get ready for Christmas.

When the people of Israel wanted to get ready for their Messiah ... they went to the Temple, they went to the synagogue, they went to Church. They went to hear someone preach about the coming Messiah.

When Christmas falls on a Sunday we quickly find out which preachers/congregations/church members make worship a priority ... & which ones don't. To those who don't,

sermons aren't all that important this Christmas.

I realize that we all joke about them ... but **sermons** have always been **vital** to God's plan.

"By means of the so-called 'foolish' message we preach, God decided to save those who believe." (1 Corinthians 1:21)

And what is the "so-called 'foolish' message" of all good preaching?

"The message about Christ's death on the cross is nonsense to those who are being lost; but for us who are being saved it is God's power." (1 Corinthians 1:18)

No matter what Sunday people go to Church ... even on Christmas ... worshippers need to be brought into the presence of the cross of Jesus, because it's only at the foot of the **cross** that we receive the **power** of God.

In every Church that I've served, here in the pulpit, I've placed these challenging words from Paul's letter to the Church in Rome.

"Faith comes from hearing the message, & the message comes through preaching Christ." (Romans 10:17)

I look at this every time I come to the pulpit; it reminds me why I'm here ... to preach about Jesus.

So the message of the cross is the power of God. And just exactly what is the message of the cross? ...

It's turn away from your sins.

"Everyone has sinned & is far away from God's saving presence" (Romans 3:23) ... even gossiping Preachers.

The cross of Jesus is God's declaration that our sins separate us from Him, & it's a testimony of what Jesus did to bring us righteously back into God's presence.

At the cross we find the same message John the baptizer preached ... our sins need to be dealt with.

So, the 1st thing we can do to get ready for Jesus is to commit ourselves to being in Church because that's where we're confronted by the preaching that leads to repentance.

Okay, to get ready for Jesus ... 1st, it's all about where we go. 2^{ndly}, it's all about **what** we do. It's not enough to hear a sermon about repentance & then to say "we want to change" ... we actually have to change.

There's this constant debate today going back & forth about whether or not we live in a Christian nation. According to an ABC poll taken last summer ... 83% of Americans identify themselves as Christians. 83%!

But while most people are professing Christianity ... they certainly aren't living it. What they really need to do is hear & accept the message of the cross.

They need to repent of the way they're living.

Now I realize that I'm preaching to the choir here, but my point is, each one of us ... you & I ... need to evaluate our lives & determine if there are things that must be changed to get ourselves ready for Jesus.

So 1st, it's all about where we go. 2^{ndly}, it's all about what we do.

Lastly, it's all about what's **most important** to us.

John the baptizer understood that his main role was not to draw attention to himself.

His job was to point people to the coming Messiah.

The Prophet Isaiah declared that John would be ... a man "shouting in the desert:

'Get the road ready for the Lord.'"

But he was so effective that it wasn't long before the people "began to wonder whether John perhaps might be the Messiah" himself. Well, John quickly set everyone straight. "I am not the Messiah. ... I am 'the voice of someone shouting in the desert.'" (John 1:20,23)

He knew & accepted his role.

I love the story of the family that celebrated Christmas every year with a birthday party for Jesus. They always sat an extra chair of honor at the table, which was their reminder of Jesus' presence. There was a cake with candles. And they sang "Happy Birthday" to Jesus. They did this year after year.

One Christmas, in the middle of the afternoon, an aunt & uncle stopped by their home to visit. During the conversation they asked the little girl ...

"Did you get everything you wanted for Christmas?"

After a moment's hesitation, she answered,

"No, but then it's not my birthday!"

John the baptizer wasn't worried about getting all the attention because it wasn't about him ...

it was about Jesus.

In fact, John stressed that point. (X) "Jesus must become more important while I become less important."

(John 3:30)

All John wanted to do was make sure that he directed people to Jesus. ...

And that should be our greatest desire as well.

I recently read a story that a mother wrote for Guidepost magazine ...

My young daughter, Jana, was so excited about her part in the Christmas play at our Church that I was sure she was one of the main characters. But she would never tell me what part she was playing. She wanted it to be a surprise. The night of the performance all the parents & grandparents were in the audience excitedly anticipating.

One by one the children took their places for the opening scene. I could see the shepherds fidgeting in one corner as Mary & Joseph stood solemnly behind the manger. In the back 3 young Magi waited impatiently. Jana was calmly sitting quietly & confidently on a chair, offstage. Then the teacher began ... "A long time ago, Mary & Joseph had a baby, & they named Him Jesus. And when Jesus was born, a bright star appeared over the stable." With that cue, Jana got up from her chair, picked up a large tin-foil star, walked behind Mary & Joseph, & held the star up high for everyone to see. When the teacher told about the shepherds coming to see the baby the 3 young shepherds came forward.

And Jana jiggled the star up & down excitedly to show them where to come. When the Magi responded to their cue, Jana took a few steps forward to meet them, & to lead the way. Her face was alight as the real star might have been that night. The play ended. We had refreshments. And on the way home Jana said, with great satisfaction, "I had the main part!" "You did?" I questioned, wondering why she thought that. "Yes," she said, "'cause I showed everybody how to find Jesus!"
'Cause I showed everybody how to find Jesus.

When all is said & done ...
wouldn't that be a wonderful way to be remembered?

That was the mission of John the baptizer, & my friends ... that's our mission as well.

Rather than fearing what is to come, we're to be faithful ... getting ready to see Him. Instead of fearing the dark, we're to be light for the whole world.

(Matthew 5:14)

(X) We are in the season Advent ... the season of getting ready ... the season of expectation.

We are an Advent people. We are holding the star.

We too, each have the main part ... to show everybody how to find Jesus.

May each of us do that at least once this Advent season.

MARANA THA