

ARE YOU PREPARED?

MATTHEW 3:1-12

This Christmas season, I invite you to reflect with me on four questions that we often hear this time of year. The first one is, “Are you prepared? Are you ready for Christmas yet?” Christmas has become this event in our culture that often demands massive amounts of time and energy to be prepared for. So, are you ready? Are you prepared? Maybe you can identify with a football player who was coached by one of the game’s legends – Amos Alonzo Stagg. Coach Stagg kept his subs on the bench constantly involved and alert by suddenly popping questions at them while the game was underway. One afternoon he turned to a fourth string player who hadn’t seen a single minute of game action all season. Coach Staff barked, “You over there! Cartmell! What would you do if we had possession of the ball with one minute to play, the score tied and we had only four yards to go for a touchdown?” Poor Cartmell was caught off guard. He wasn’t prepared. “Well, Coach, I believe I’d slide down to the end of the bench so I could see better!” If you’re actually all ready for Christmas – cards sent, gifts purchased and wrapped, all holiday plans made – all power to you! The rest of us lesser mortals are having a hard time just getting in the game!

For centuries now, Christians have considered the four weeks leading up to Christmas Day – the season of Advent which means “coming” – as a time to get spiritually ready and prepared. Get ready for what? Get ready for Jesus’ coming all over again spiritually. When a baby is on the way, there’s a sense of expectation and looking forward to something wonderful about to happen. There’s lots of preparation. I’m sure Mary and Joseph felt that way as they got ready for Jesus’ birth. Christmas is a time for you to let God do something fresh, new and wonderful in your life. Are you prepared for that? Are you ready for that?

Today’s Bible text is all about preparation. John the Baptist was not your average guy. He had a strange diet, a strange home and strange clothes. He was Jesus’ cousin biologically, but we don’t know if they actually knew each other well. John’s whole ministry was about getting people ready for Jesus’ coming. He was the fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy. “Listen! It’s the voice of someone shouting, ‘Clear the way through the wilderness for the LORD! Make a straight highway through the wasteland for our God!’” (Is 40:3 NLT) Just a word about roads in general back in John and Jesus’ day and time.... Very few roads were surfaced with any kind of permanent material that made them easy to travel on. The few roads that were built were constructed primarily by kings for royal use exclusively. And they only got repaired when the king actually needed to travel on them. Before the king was expected to arrive in a certain area, a message was sent out to the people in that location to go out and get the king’s road in shape for the king’s arrival. Big potholes were filled in. Large rocks and stones were removed. Isaiah prophesied that John’s ministry would accomplish that task for Jesus in a spiritual sense. John was preparing the way spiritually for the King of kings and the Lord of lords – Jesus Himself.

So, what does it mean to get ready or to be prepared for Christmas in a spiritual sense? How do you fill in spiritual potholes or remove spiritual boulders that are obstructing the way to a fuller, more meaningful relationship with God? Can you truly get ready to meet Jesus in a new way? I believe our Bible text points to some answers. Here's the first one:

BE PREPARED TO REPENT.

“Repentance.” There's a word we don't use very often! More importantly, it's not something we do very often either. John the Baptist makes it clear that repentance is very important to getting ready and staying ready for Jesus. He tells the people, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” (Mt 3:2 NIV) What does he mean by “the kingdom of heaven”? That's actually a phrase that he and, later on, Jesus used a great deal. Among other meanings, it's all about God breaking into this world and your life personally. It means God breaking into your family, your marriage, your neighborhood, your country, your church. It's a demonstration that God is both present and powerful. The kingdom of Heaven is a God thing. Now, here, John is referring to the fact that Jesus' public ministry was about to start. People were right on the verge of experiencing God like never before – in Jesus' words, in Jesus' actions and in Jesus' presence.

That's a miracle that keeps on happening even today. Some two thousand years later, we believe that the kingdom of Heaven continues to be “near”. God continues to break into the lives of people to do miraculous things. Like what? Through Jesus, He gives people the gift of eternal life. Through Jesus, He forgives sin. Through Jesus, He heals broken marriages and messed up families. Through Jesus, he comforts those who grieve some great loss in life or who are anxious about the future. Through Jesus, God still does all kinds of miracles. Since Jesus now indwells His followers - all those who trust in Him, love him and seek to obey Him – the kingdom of Heaven reaches out and touches billions of lives all over the world through those Jesus followers.

There are two expressions of repentance in this passage. The first one is confession of sin. You can't begin to follow Jesus without confessing that you're a sinner in need of a Savior and asking God to forgive all your sins. It starts there. John the Baptist knew that. That's why before people were baptized they confessed their sins. If those folk were going to truly hear, understand and follow Jesus, there was going to have to be a major internal clean up. Now if you can't even begin the Christian life without confession, it's also true that you can't live the Christian life without making confession of your sins a regular part of your life. The Bible says, “He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.” (Prov 28:13 NLT)

Jim Cymbala, a pastor and author, writes, “Confession of sin is the most important key to being a people and a church that lives continually under the blessing of heaven.... Confessing our sin leads to the greatest spiritual joy and

peace we can experience as human beings.” Most of us take a shower every day. Have you ever thought about the importance of taking a spiritual shower every day as well? Get prepared for Jesus every day by confessing your sins. I want to give us an opportunity right now at this moment to confess our sins in a time of silent prayer. Whatever the Holy Spirit reveals to you – admit it. Call it what God calls it. Express your grief to God for having committed that sin and ask Him to forgive you on the basis of Jesus’ blood shed for you at the cross.

The second expression of repentance is simply making it a new way of life. That’s what John has to remind the Pharisees and Sadducees about who came to him for baptism. These were the religious leaders of John and Jesus’ day. They were the equivalent of very moral, Bible-believing and church-going people today. But, apparently, they thought they could do something that felt and looked “religious” and then go off and be the same kind of people they were before. You and I can easily fall into that trap, too. You can focus on looking religious and never get serious about becoming like Jesus. But real repentance is a broken, surrendered attitude towards God all of the time.

I don’t know A.F. Wedel, but I really liked what he wrote about repentance. “Repentance penetrates the crusts of piety we wrap around ourselves to keep us from piety. Repentance begins in the heart and turns life upside down for us and right side up for God. Repentance reverses our priorities, upsets our values, turns our pockets inside out.... Repentance revolts against the sin we have loved and reconciles us to God whom we have not loved.” Has something like that ever happened in your walk with God? My friend, to be truly born again by the Spirit of God leads inevitably towards a deep, powerful change that results in a completely new orientation towards God, towards other people and towards life itself. If that hasn’t happened to you yet, you’re not ready for Jesus. If that hasn’t happened to you lately, then you’re not prepared for His coming at this new Christmas season. Are you ready? Are you prepared? Secondly...

BE PREPARED TO BEAR FRUIT.

Here’s part of what John says to the Pharisees and Sadducees, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” (Mt 3:8 NIV) They thought they loved and obeyed God, but their personal lives, their inner character and their indifference to the needs of others told a very different story. Real repentance always leads to bearing spiritual fruit. What did John mean here by bearing fruit? Bearing fruit means demonstrating a God-filled character. The Bible says, “But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control...” (Gal 5:22-23 NLT) So, how does your life measure up to that list? We all fall and fail in those areas pretty regularly, don’t we? Not one of us here today can consistently demonstrate any of those character qualities unless and until God is filling up your life. So, is He? Is the Holy Spirit filling up your life today?

Later on, Jesus said this about bearing fruit. “Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5 NLT) Do you hear the warning in Jesus’ words? In the same passage, Jesus says, “He (God) cuts off every branch of mine that doesn’t produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more.” (John 15:2 NLT) There’s a very simple, direct message: being fruitless invites disaster. You can make yourself useless to God by producing the spoiled spiritual fruit of hatred, a grumbling spirit, worry, impatience, unkindness, lack of integrity, harshness and selfishness. If you’re content to live like that, you will invite spiritual disaster on yourself.

Bearing fruit, also, means reaching out to others to meet their needs because you love and serve Jesus. This can happen by offering up random, spontaneous acts of kindness or compassion to people or it can also be the result of giving yourself away to others in regular, faithful and disciplined ways.

Mike was a great guy, but he hated Christmas. Oh, not the true meaning of Christmas. Just the commercialization of it: overspending, the frantic running around at the last minute, the gifts given in desperation. Mike’s wife knew all this about her husband and she looked for an opportunity to bypass the usual, obligatory giving of shirts, sweaters, ties, etc. Mike and his wife had a son named Kevin who was wrestling at the junior level at the school he attended. Shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against another team sponsored by an inner-city church. These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that the shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to Kevin and his team in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, Mike and his wife were alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without any protective headgear. It was simply a luxury they couldn’t afford. Kevin’s team walloped the other team. As each of the boys from the other team got up from the mat, he swaggered around with false bravado – a kind of street pride that couldn’t acknowledge defeat.

Mike shook his head sadly. “I just wish one of them could have won,” he said. “They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them.” That’s when the idea for Mike’s Christmas present came to his wife. That afternoon, she went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, Mike’s wife placed an envelope on the Christmas tree with a note inside telling Mike what she’s done and that this was his gift from her. Mike’s smile was the biggest thing about Christmas. Since then, Mike’s wife continues to follow that tradition. One year it was sending a group of mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game. Another year, it was a giving a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas. That envelope on the Christmas tree telling what had been done for others became the highlight of that family’s Christmas.

One way you know if you're ready for Jesus to come – that you're prepared for Him to do something new and wonderful in your life – is to check and see if you're producing any spiritual fruit. Is your character being changed? Are you becoming more like Jesus – in your attitudes, in your behavior, in what you value? In addition, are you giving your life away to others because you love Jesus? Are you passionate about mission, about outreach, about touching the lives of others with Jesus' love? Are you prepared? Are you ready? Be prepared to repent. Be prepared to bear fruit. Thirdly and finally...

BE PREPARED TO POINT PEOPLE TO JESUS.

Isn't that what John the Baptist did? His entire life mission was simply to point people to Jesus. If you're a follower of Jesus, that's your life mission as well: to point people to Jesus. Your life mission is not to be successful, not to achieve your personal potential and not to be the best you can be. It's to point people to Jesus. Now, I'm glad you don't have to wear camel hide underwear and eat bugs covered with honey like John the Baptist in order to do that! The Bible does say, however, that you need to be ready to point others to Jesus at any time you have the opportunity. It says, "... And if someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way..." (1Pt 3:15-16 NLT) Is there a more appropriate time of year than Christmas to share with someone what Jesus means to you or a season of the year when that someone might be more open to hear what you have to say? Yes, it's a happy time for many. It's also a very sad and lonely times for others. Loneliness feels lonelier at Christmas. Grief cuts deeper at Christmas. The chronic pain of bruised and battered relationships aches even worse at Christmas. Uncertainty about the future feels bleaker at Christmas.

Learn to listen to the sigh in people's lives – both literally and figuratively. Where people sigh and groan is often where they are most receptive to Jesus. So you can say to someone, "I heard that sigh and I've had my share in life, too. Can I share with you the difference Jesus makes in my life?" Can you think of anything more wonderful than sharing Jesus with an unsaved family member this Christmas season, a next door neighbor or a friend at work or school? Jesus' followers have the joy of pointing people to Jesus every day – that's true – but how much more wonderful during the Christmas season!

Why this sense of urgency about pointing people to Jesus? When God took upon Himself human flesh and blood in a baby called Jesus, it was both a blessing and a warning. John the Baptist understood that. He says to these Pharisees and Sadducees, "I baptize with water those who repent of their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is greater than I am... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire." (Matt 3:11-12 NLT) What does John mean? Jesus is the One who baptizes

with the Holy Spirit meaning that He alone is able to put you into God and put God into you. Baptism in the Spirit: it's another way of referring to salvation, being born again or becoming Jesus' follower.

The image of fire here can have both a positive and a negative implication. In a positive sense, fire is a symbol of God's light, God's warmth, God's love being shed abroad in your heart. It reminds you of God's love, God's mercy and God's grace. Fire can bring light, heat and warmth. But fire also burns and destroys, doesn't it? Christmas is also a warning to any person who just ignores the need to repent of his or her sins. The coming of Jesus is a threat to anyone who wants to remain lord and master of his or her own little life. If you want to try to be the savior of your own life – and thereby reject what God has provided by sending Jesus – then, frankly, Christmas is more judgment than blessing for you. The promise of eternal life becomes the threat of eternal damnation.

John compares Jesus to a farmer here. The farmer brings all the wheat into his barn. Using a winnowing fork he tosses it all up in the air. Because the chaff is lighter in weight, it blows away. The wheat and the chaff get separated. The wheat is kept; the chaff is burned. When Jesus comes, there's always a decision that must be made. Will I follow Him or reject Him? Will I love Him or will I ignore Him? Will I surrender to His Lordship of my life or will I reject Him by staying in charge of my own life? Precisely because you know this decision for Jesus is eternally important, you constantly looking to point people to Jesus.

John Harper was born into a Christian family in 1872. He became a Christian at age 13 and was already preaching by age 17. In 1896 – at the age of 24 – he founded a church in London which began with 25 worshippers and grew to 500 members by the time John Harper left 13 years later. In 1912, John Harper, the newly called pastor of historic Moody Church in Chicago, booked passage along with his 6 year old daughter on a ship by the name of the *Titanic*. After the ship struck an iceberg and began to sink, he got his daughter into a lifeboat but apparently made no effort to follow her. Instead, he ran through the ship yelling, "Women, children and unsaved into the lifeboats!" Survivors report that he then began witnessing to anyone who would listen. He continued preaching even after he had jumped into the freezing water and was clinging to a piece of wreckage. He'd already given his life jacket to another man.

Four years later in 1916, John Harper's final moments were recounted at a meeting in Hamilton, Ontario by a man who said, "I am a survivor of the *Titanic*. When I was drifting alone on a spar that awful night, the tide brought Mr. Harper of Glasgow, also on a piece of wreck, near me. 'Man,' he said, 'are you saved?' 'No,' I said, 'I am not.' Harper replied, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.' The waves bore him away, but – strange to say – brought him back a little later, and he said, 'Are you saved now?' 'No,' I said, 'I cannot honestly say that I am.' Harper said again, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved,' and shortly after he went down; and there, alone in the

night, and with two miles of water under me, I believed. I am John Harper's last convert." That man was only one of six people picked out of the water by the lifeboats. The other 1522 people – including John Harper – were left to die.

It was John the Baptist's mission to point people to Jesus. It was John Harper's mission to point people to Jesus. If you're a follower of Jesus, it is your mission to point people to Jesus. Probably not as dramatically as either John the Baptist or John Harper, but with the same passion, the same determination, the same single-mindedness and the same love. So, are you prepared? Are you ready for Christmas? Are you prepared for the coming of Jesus? Be ready to repent and do it. Be ready to bear fruit and do it. Be ready to point people to Jesus and do it.