

Preparing the Way

Advent Discoveries:

Matthew 3:1-12

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Have you've been caught unprepared? When I was in school, some teachers would pull "pop quizzes" to see if we had been studying. Have any of you suffered that? There were many times I was caught unprepared. One time in college I was unprepared by choice. I was a freshman, and I failed a scheduled calculus exam. At the end of the term, the professor asked to speak to me. He noted that I would have achieved an "A" in his class if I hadn't failed that test. "What happened?" he asked. "Well," I explained, "the Vikings were playing the Atlanta Falcons on Monday Night Football. Fran Tarkenton was facing coaching nemesis Norm Van Brocklin. I asked myself, 'am I a football fan or a calculus student?' I decided, 'football fan.'" Well, the Vikings lost that Monday night; and unprepared, I lost the next morning.

The need for preparations goes well beyond school tests. It goes beyond making our homes ready for house guests on holiday weekends. The Bible teaches that it is necessary to prepare for God. "Prepare the way for the Lord," the Bible teaches. John the Baptist was called to that purpose. He preceded Jesus both in birth and ministry.

The first chapter of Luke's gospel reveals that John's birth prepared Mary and others for the birth of Jesus. It helped them welcome the visitation of God in infant form. The adult work of John the Baptist, described in Matthew 3, helped 1st Century Jews welcome the visitation of God in adult Jesus; and it helps us get ready for his return as ruling king.

Two weeks ago, 84-year-old Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz was in Rochester for a medical checkup. He and his entourage of staff and relatives arrived in two 747 jumbo jets. In their short time here, they spent over 1.5 million dollars and rented 5 U-Haul trucks to haul their purchases back to the jumbo jets. According to a news account, the royals made the year for our local Macys. The King himself stayed in the International Hotel which sits atop the Kahler Grand Hotel. I understand that the royals refused to eat in an upscale restaurant when the silverware did not fulfill their expectations. Can you imagine the planning, time, efforts and even sacrifices it took to prepare the way for this king? Now what about the Lord

Over three hundred times in the New Testament, John the Baptist, Jesus and his Apostles address the theme of preparing the way for the Lord. Do you remember Jesus' story of ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom to arrive? They all had lamps burning with oil waiting for the wedding party, but the bridegroom was delayed. Only five brought extra oil and were prepared. All were invited, but only five were welcomed. Do you remember Jesus' story of the dishonest manager? The boss found out his manager was a lazy cheat. When the manager found he was to be audited, he quickly made friends through his boss's wealth and secured his future with others. Jesus told people to learn from this man. Despite their wicked way, they needed to use the resources they've been given to ingratiate themselves now with the one who can secure their eternal future. Jesus was saying, "Prepare the way."

When all our children were at home, Diane worked evenings at a local hospital. She would leave the house around 2:30 p.m. with everything in order and clean. When the children arrived home after school, they would leave a shoe here, a book there, a toy here, a paper there. Then we'd eat supper and the kitchen would accumulate dishes and crumbs. I'd spread my mail over the dining room table. Buddy the dog would track his dusty paws and shed his hair in the

rooms to which he was confined. I'd read a paper or magazine. John would try out a video game. Debbie might curl up with a book, and Sarah spread out her stuff in the living room to accomplish some project. Truthfully, my wife minded none of those activities if we cleaned up the kitchen, organized the mail, picked up the clutter, swept up the dirt and vacuumed the hair... and the kids completed their homework. However, more times than any of us Gabels care to remember, I was yelling at my children in a frantic, faltering race to prepare the way for her return. You can imagine that I would not have been frantic if I had not been caught unprepared too often. I suspect that some of you can painfully relate to my story.

I want you to know that my wife did not return home to judge. She did not return to inspect the house, reward the industrious and punish the lazy. She returned to sleep... in the house she left. However, Jesus is not returning to sleep in the world he left. He is not returning to give people another chance. Of Jesus, John the Baptist said:

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire. (Matthew 3:12, NIV)

Jesus is coming expressly to judge. He is coming to honor the people who have repented and become servants of his Father. He is coming to deliver those who are oppressed and to punish those who oppress. He is returning to destroy death and all its allies who rebel against their creator. Jesus' return will be terrific vindication for some and horrific realization for others.

We are called to prepare the way, and this call is first a personal call. It is a call to personal repentance. If you do not acknowledge the mess sin makes of your personal life, that you need forgiveness and change, then you are included in John's affront:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father." I tell you that out of these stones God can

raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matthew 3:7-10, NIV)

We are not Jews who glory in their relationship to Abraham. Many of us were raised Christians and glory in our baptismal covenant naming us children of God. Yet, if we are inattentive to God's word and call, we are far worse off than a student choosing not to prepare for his exam or a father not tending to his responsibilities. Are you personally prepared for Jesus' return?

John the Baptist said that the Messiah would baptize individuals with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Jesus pours the gift of the Holy Spirit on believers. The Holy Spirit reconnects us spiritually with God as his children, so that by nature we cry "Papa," "Father." Have you tasted the love of God as His child? Has that happened for you? Having received that love, have you grown cold in that love? Have you been grieving or resisting God's Spirit? Are you harboring resent and unforgiveness? That is rebellion. The baptism of fire is the judgment that purges the earth of its rebellion. At Christmas, Jesus came into the world, not to judge it, but to save it by serving it. In his return he serves the world by judging it. He completes the business of salvation by destroying the rebellion against God and the resulting bondage to sin and death. He baptizes with fire.

The call to prepare the way is second a social call. If we love our neighbors as ourselves, we will help them prepare. We will, like John the Baptist, be witnesses and heralds for the returning Lord of creation. Our mission at Bethany is stated as a command: Go and bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ. We are to prepare the way for our neighbors whom we love. To whom has your Father sent you? In what ways are you preparing the way for your family, friends, neighbors, city, and nation? Are they included in your prayers and deeds?

I've got good news. We are now in the day of repentance and salvation. We are now in the day when Jesus is pouring out the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of adoption. Like the dishonest manager, whatever we have done up until now to cheat God and devour his creation won't matter if we act today. Today is the day to prepare the way. Not for the King of Saudi Arabia! No, now is the time to prepare for the glorious deliverance of the Lord of Creation!