

Advent 3 / December 13, 2020

John 1:23

“He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.’”

The coming of the Lord is the theme of Advent. What are you doing to prepare for the coming of the Lord? We might think of preparing for the Lord’s coming at Advent, in terms of getting ready to celebrate His birth on Christmas Day; decorating, planning dinner, shopping, wrapping gifts. There are only twelve more shopping days to Christmas! However, the coming of the Lord we anticipate during Advent is not Christmas Day, that’s Christmas past. The coming of the Lord we anticipate at Advent is in the future, Jesus’ return on the last day as King and Lord of all. Before His dying and rising, Jesus told parables of preparation saying, “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” Advent challenges us to ask ourselves: How are we watching? How do we watch? How do we prepare for the Lord’s coming?

John the Baptist answers our questions. He prepared the people of his day for the first coming of the Lord, by calling them to repent: to consider their lives according to the measure of God’s righteousness, as expressed in His holy law. When we consider our lives against the perfection of God’s righteousness expressed in His holy law, we realize that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. We prepare for Christ’s return as Saviour and Lord, by seeing our sin in the light of God’s holy law, confessing our sinfulness and coming to Jesus for forgiveness. Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He comes into our heart as Saviour through faith generated by the Holy Spirit, in the word and by the washing of baptism. We prepare for Jesus’ return by coming to Him for forgiveness, mercy and peace.

John the Baptist had a twofold job. He made people ready for the coming of the Lord, by calling them to repent for the forgiveness of their sins; and he showed them the Lord. On the eighth day of his birth, when he was circumcised and made part of the covenant community, his father gave him his job description. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah prophesied to him saying, “And you child, will be called prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Being that he was only eight days old, it probably took some time for the full impact of his father’s words to sink in; but sink in they did! And in time, they blossomed in faith towards God and faithfulness to the Lord’s word.

The gospel writers tell us that thirty years later, “John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” He was the fulfilment of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of Lord.” John set people straight and made them ready for the coming of the Lord, by calling them to repent and baptizing them for the forgiveness of their sin.

That’s important, because in order to see our Saviour, we have to be able to see our sin. It’s important to see our sin, but the most important thing is to see our Saviour. Sin without a Saviour leads to death and despair. Judas saw his sin after he betrayed Jesus, but because he couldn’t see Jesus as his Saviour, he gave into despair. Peter also saw his sin, after he denied knowing Jesus three times in the courtyard of the high priest. He too would have given into despair, had Jesus not looked at him with eyes of grace and mercy. He saw his sin, but more importantly, in Jesus, he saw his Saviour. We see our sin, so we would see Jesus as our Saviour.

John had an important job in preaching the law so people would see their sin. But John’s most important job as prophet of the Most-High God, was to direct people to Jesus as the Saviour. John had the blessed privilege of being the first person to identify Jesus as the Christ. When he baptized Jesus, he saw the Holy Spirit descend on Him as dove and anoint Him. He heard the divine voice say, “You are my beloved Son.” He was blessed to share the good news of the gospel and tell others, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” We prepare for Advent, the return of Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords, by beholding Him as the Lamb of God who takes away our sin, our Saviour and Lord.

John the Baptist must have been a striking person. He dressed in camel’s hair. He wore a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild honey. He spoke fiery messages, calling people out for their sins and calling them to repent and receive a washing in the Jordan River, for the forgiveness of sins. People travelled from the length and breadth of Galilee and Judea to hear him. I picture him as a big, burly, hairy man like Samson; but with more moral integrity.

I imagine he had a loud, booming voice that carried a great distance, caught people's attention and captivated them. His voice was his most important and distinctive feature. He was a voice crying in the wilderness.

When people asked him who he was, he simply said he was 'a voice.' He didn't say he was anybody, not even John, the son of Zechariah the priest. He was a voice, but not just a voice, he was a voice who spoke the word of God. Whatever his voice sounded like, whether it was loud and booming, deep and sonorous, or small and still like the voice that spoke to the prophet Elijah at Mount Horeb, He was the voice who identified Jesus as the word of God, the lamb of God, the Christ, the Saviour of sinners. The most important aspect of a voice are the words it speaks. The most important words are words that identify Jesus as the Christ and show Him to be our Saviour.

John was a preacher of the law. He prepared people to receive the Christ, by revealing their sin. But he cleared the way for Jesus to enter into the hearts of those who heard him, not by the law, not by telling them what to do, but by telling them about the forgiveness of the Lord. As his father said, he gave people knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of their sins in the mercy of God, in the sending of Jesus as the Christ, our Saviour and Lord.

Law reveals sin, Jesus takes sin away. As John said, He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Law may change the outward conduct of people through force, threat and coercion; but only the gospel of God's mercy, love and forgiveness in Christ, changes the heart of a human being. King David sang, "Create in me a clean heart O God and renew a right spirit within me." God creates clean hearts through His love in the gospel of Christ Jesus.

John was like building inspector, who reports on structural damage and gives you a list of things that need repair. John gives the bad news through the law, but he renovated the hearts of those who listened to his voice, through a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. John renovated the human heart, cleared away sin and sinfulness, by pointing people to God's mercy in the promise of a Saviour to free us from the control of sin and to release us from the condemnation of death. John takes us to the feet of Jesus, in whom we receive the tender mercy of God in the forgiveness of sin, freedom from bondage to sin and the promise of pardon from eternal death, in the resurrection of Christ! John is the voice who shows us the word that gives eternal life. That word is Jesus Christ our Saviour!

How do we prepare for the advent of our King? We prepare for the advent of Christ and the renewal of heaven and earth as the home of righteousness, by joining Mary of Bethany, sitting at His feet and listening to His words. Moses said, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." He is the word of God, who became flesh and dwelt among us. He is the image of the invisible God, through whom all things came to be and in whom all things are held together. There is nothing more important than listening to Jesus. He is the word of life. He speaks words that give forgiveness, the Holy Spirit and eternal life.

We prepare for the advent of our King by treasuring His words of forgiveness and renewal, promised to us in our baptism into His death and resurrection. John's baptism was great! People came from miles around to receive from John, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus' baptism is greater! Consider what greater gifts and promises we receive through our baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection; forgiveness in time and for eternity, adoption as children of the heavenly Father, the Holy Spirit and resurrection to life everlasting. For while John baptized with water, Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

We prepare for His advent by receiving as often as we are able, the rich feast of forgiveness and eternal life, offered in the sacrament of His holy body and precious blood. In this sacrament we receive forgiveness of our sins, spiritual nourishment and a foretaste of the feast of life, which we will celebrate when He comes into His kingdom. He comes to us now in grace with mercy through these humble means to prepare us to receive Him when He comes with power in the presence of the holy angels, seated at the right hand of God the Father. We prepare for His advent by joining our voices to John's voice; praising His name and sharing the good news of His salvation with others, saying "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Your Saviour comes! He comes to you with grace in His heart, healing in His hands and forgiveness on His lips.' Come Lord Jesus! In Jesus' Name. Amen