

It's time for our annual Advent trip to the banks of the Jordan River to come to terms with whether we are ready, **by that I mean, prepared—to repent and receive the kingdom of heaven.** Someone like John the Baptist was prophesied by Isaiah: *a voice crying in the wilderness*, both as a prayer and a call to action, looking for the coming redemption of God among the people. Dale Bruner from Whitworth College interprets John's message in this way: *“Turn your lives around! Because here comes the kingdom of heaven!”*

Bruner also reminds us of a key truth that is easy to overlook in our 21<sup>st</sup> century mindset. “Kingdom” is a large scale, social, word. Even though John is speaking to individuals about the need to change their lives, he is not speaking to them as individuals, *per se*, but as a community—we might even say as **THE particular community** that has been set apart by God for God's purposes in the world. In other words, individuals need to change but the responsibility for transformation does not end at the edge of one's heart.

What John is praying and equipping the people for is REVIVAL. Remember in Ezra-Nehemiah when the people encounter the law again for the first time in a long time? They weep and they cry out for grace. They are ready to be different because of what they encounter. And here on the banks of the Jordan River, John the Baptist is inviting the people of God to the same sort of turnaround of purpose and way of living. He preaches the law of God, God's picture of how to live for the good of all, and he also offers them an experience to capture the essence of their revival: BAPTISM.

Baptism is the experience of going down into the water and coming back out, sort of like being born from amniotic fluid or being nearly drowned and then revived to life, at least immersion baptism. Here too we are reminded that though it is an individual that is being baptized, the whole community is involved as witnesses to the act of baptism, as fellow travelers, as encouragers, and as the family of God now being prepared to receive and make a commitment to bearing fruit for the Kingdom.

Revivals have been in the news of late because they are springing up around the country on college campuses. They are cool and all that, but they don't really mean much if they don't lead to people thinking and acting differently. Something tells me that the Spirit of God was using John's brand of revival to make things different. As Jesus will later do as well, John's spiritual movement is outside the boundaries of the establishment and has gained enough traction that it's also caught the attention of the official leadership.

Not only do these leaders *go out to the river* to see what's going on for themselves, but they also appear to gain some credibility or maybe just credit for showing up and participating in these events. John sees through their motive for coming and the fact that they are not there to *prepare themselves* or the people of God. So, John thunders, "*You brood of vipers!*" (v. 7). John's words help us remember that though the Kingdom is a social idea and not exclusive to individuals, though individual people are responsible for themselves in the bigger picture. John warns these nosy leaders that they should not count on simply belonging to the community by birthright via Abraham, but they must live the message (the law) and *bear good fruit*.

**Preparing**, as John goes about this important work, means knowing what is at stake and getting clarity about what is required of us. Of course, we know that with God, there will always be more; that a growing life with God is built on continuously asking "What's next, God?" But as we sit under the shouts of John the Baptist this second Sunday of Advent, we remember not only that Jesus came in the flesh two-thousand-some-odd years ago, but he will come again as v. 10 says: "*Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees!*"

The Kingdom of heaven will become the only kingdom remaining on Judgment Day. We prepare for this day by receiving the law and being transformed by the gospel grace of Jesus Christ and his Spirit. We live out our own baptismal vows (no matter how old we were when they were made, or who made them) to seek God and God's ways above all else. We prepare ourselves, our communities, and the entire world to receive God: both the Holy Spirit now, and Jesus Christ

when he returns in glory. We take responsibility for ourselves while also holding the tension that Advent waiting and preparation is a work done among God's people in community. When that happens, we shall all "*Bear fruit worthy of repentance.*"

The **preaching** part of John's forerunner work goes hand in glove with John's **preparing** ministry. I'm sorry to admit that, but it's true. Some people are more interesting to listen to than others. When some people talk, they make me sit up on the edge of my seat, while others have the gift of encouraging me to slide back in my seat as far as I can go. So, what makes the difference? What makes a talk engaging rather than sleep-inducing? Some people have written books about this, but even the very best of these leave something out. We preachers try to make sure that our language is arresting, our structure is clear, our application is rich, and our biblical theology is on point—but there's another factor that is slightly harder to address. It's the personal factor.

The very first book I read on the art of preaching as a first-year seminary student is the book *Heralds of God* (as in Hark the *Herald* Angels Sing) by Dr. James Stewart who taught preaching at Edinburgh and St. Andrews Universities. Stewart once said, "I have chosen the title of this book to stress one fundamental fact, namely, that preaching exists, not for the propagating of views, opinions and ideals, but for the proclamation of the mighty acts of God. This is demonstrably the New Testament conception of every preacher's task; and it is this that will always give preaching an essential place at the heart of Christian worship."

In Matthew 3, I see John *preparing* the way, *preaching* God's law of repentance, *receiving* the confession of sins, *baptizing* repentant sinners, and best of all, he is *pointing* others to Christ, the One who fulfills the law and the prophets. John is one of the best preachers I've ever heard. But John himself cannot, and through his stellar preaching he can never forgive sins or give the Holy Spirit. That is to say John's extremely fruitful ministry cannot remove our biggest problem (our sin), nor can he impart our most valuable resource (God's

Holy Spirit). We preachers *and* listeners would do well to follow John in this basic way: the way of pointing more and more people to the Savior.

In his classic book *Heralds of God*, James Stewart urges all preachers to take these two steps: Be yourself & Forget yourself. I suppose this is the single biggest reason why most trainee preachers are hard to listen to: they haven't yet found their voice. They still don't sound like themselves. In some cases, they never will. But there should be a basic continuity between the way we are in real life and the way we are when we preach. We should be recognizable when we preach. It should sound like us. That's the first step.

When preachers are starting out, it's hard to get past the sheer challenge of understanding the Bible and getting the words of our sermon on the page. It's a terrifying thing to stand before God's people and go from the beginning of a sermon to the end. **Preachers need to get past** the point where our focus is just on getting the words right, saying things people like, or saying things so people will like us. I learned long ago that **we preachers need to get past ourselves** to the God whom we serve. We also need to resist any temptation to be a name dropper because like John the Baptist there is ONE singular name that we need to drop in every single sermon, and it is the name of Jesus Christ the Son of God, the Savior of the world. John said of this One, "*I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire*" (v. 11).

I can sometimes imagine John the Baptist preaching his call to repentance at a place like the UN or another global gathering rather than some random street corner. Like Jesus, John's influence is significant, and the leaders come to check him out and to see what is going on—to perhaps try for a photo op! We know John has already caught the attention of Herod. Of course, John doesn't have time for political games. **He's too busy preparing** everyone because "*the kingdom of heaven has come near.*" **And he's too busy preaching** the message that "*[Christ] rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and the wonders of his love.*"

Friends: **There's still much preparing and preaching to be done!** Amen.