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Prepare the Way of the Lord
Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”^[a] ³ This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord;

make his paths straight.’ ”

⁴ Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.

*⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his^[b] baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, ⁹ and do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore **every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.***

*¹¹ “I baptize you with^[c] water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. **He will baptize you with^[d] the Holy Spirit and fire.** ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

John the Baptist is *not ideal material* for beautiful Christmas cards, or Hallmark Christmas movies!

His *home in the wilderness, his camel’s hair attire, and strange dietary* choices just don’t make for beautiful holiday—anything!

And his message?

He calls the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious rulers of his day, a brood of vipers!

He urges everyone who comes to him for baptism to *repent and turn from sin!*

So, if this is Advent, and today is about Peace—

where is peace in the story of John the Baptist?

And where is the *Christmas spirit*?

John speaks of a *baptism by fire* that is coming from the One after him,
 Who we know is Jesus.
 And an unquenchable fire for all who are like chaff, needing to be burned!

Fire was a common *symbol for judgment* in the Scriptures,
 but is that what we want to hear at Christmas?
 Or anytime?
 Aren't many of us coming to church—*to escape judgment*?
 Presbyterian churches are notorious for being full of people
 who have left other denominations because of judgment, condemnation, guilt, and
 a lack of acceptance.
 So *where is the good news* in John's message?

Well, let's start with *John's context*.
 We know he is the cousin of Jesus,
 we know his mother Elizabeth and father Zechariah were well past child-bearing
 years, so he was a miraculous baby!

We know that when he *started to preach and baptize*,
 and did so by living out in the wilderness,
 eating locusts and honey and wearing camel's hair clothing.
 Not exactly standard for people of his day!

We know he is reminiscent of another important figure in the Bible—
 the *prophet Elijah*, who also ministered in the wilderness,
 and was outspoken about God's message.

And the *WILDERNESS*—*well, that is a very important place in the Bible*.
 Wilderness is synonymous with a place of *transformation*.
 It is a *liminal space*, or place of transition.
 It's where *searching and change* happens.

The *Israelites* traveled through the wilderness for 40 years
 after escaping slavery in Egypt---and it was in those years that God provided them
 bread from heaven called manna, water from the rock, quail to eat, and the 10
 commandments!
 It was in the wilderness that God's people truly learned *to trust and obey!*

Jesus too went into the wilderness for 40 days after his baptism by John,

and he was tempted there by Satan.
 He showed his ***trust and obedience*** to God there in the wilderness.
 And after a fast of 40 days, angels waited on him there and fed him.

So the wilderness is a liminal space, a place of trial and transformation.
 It is a place to learn trust and obedience,
 It is a place to find a new mindset, a new way of life,
 But---it is also ***outside most people's comfort zones***.

People in John's day ***did not hang out in the wilderness*** unless they were outcasts,
 like lepers, or strange preachers, like John!
 To be in the wilderness meant to leave behind the familiar
 and venture into a ***strange place***.

People didn't always want to be in the wilderness.

Even the Israelites, having escaped slavery in Egypt and miraculously crossing the
 Red Sea, grumbled to their leader Moses in the wilderness, saying at one point:
if only we had stayed in Egypt!

John the Baptist, by preaching in the wilderness,
 is ***lifting up those outside the city centers of power***.
 He is preaching to many who are on the ***margins*** of society, the outcasts, those left
 behind, those who have nothing to lose by coming to the wilderness.

What does this mean for US today?

What if we too are called to ***meet God, off the beaten path?***

What if ***Advent*** is our wilderness time,
 when we leave our comfort zone, and learn more about trust and obedience?

What if it means we are called right now—
 to allow God to ***change and transform*** us?

John's story begs the question—

would we have gone out into the wilderness to see John the Baptist?

Or would we have only gone out there like the Pharisees and Sadducees,
 to oppose him, or mock his strange way of life?

Would we have been ***spiritual seekers?***

Eager to hear his message of repentance and cleansing fire?

Or would we have ignored him?

Maybe we're not sure what we would have done.

But we can be sure that *John still offers us a message today*, for this Advent.
 God still asks us to venture into the wilderness,
To be spiritual seekers, to look for God, even in strange places,
 even outside our comfort zone!

What if God is asking us this Advent—
To be curious, to *look for God* in different places and people?

And what if God is asking us to leave our comfort zones,
 by *leaving behind some of our old traditions*?

Before you stop listening, because I just uttered some *Christmas blasphemy*,
 consider this—*we always have to adjust some traditions*,
 because people leave or pass away, kids grow up,
 families and relationships, and churches change, don't they?
 Or a pandemic called Covid happens, and everything changes, right?

We WANT to have everything the way we want it,
 the way it's always been, the way of tradition,
 so we know what to expect....
 but *life is not the way we want it, and that's ok*.
 And changing traditions is ok too!

I know when my *kids were very small* and spent Christmas Eve at their Dad's
 house, it was sad for me to be alone on Christmas Eve.
 But I started making the most of that time after church services,
 just sitting in the dark and staring at the Christmas tree lights,
 and praying for friends and family,
 and resting after a long Christmas season.
 It became less sad, and more of a respite.
A new tradition.

What are some of your *traditions that should be let go*?
 How can you *give that to God this year, and embrace something new*?

You know the *image of fire is not always about judgment and wrath* in the Bible,
 it's also a symbol of *cleansing and refining*—
 the way a silversmith refines liquid metal before making something new.
 When the refiner's fire heats that metal to liquid,
 and can see his own image in the surface—*that's a sign it's refined*.

What if God does that in our lives?

Using the fires of life like a refiner's fire—
until the ***image of God shimmers in our lives?***

The prophet Malachi talks about this in ***Malachi 3:1-3:***

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

*For he is like **a refiner's fire and like washers' soap**; ³ he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them **like gold and silver**, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.*

Doesn't that sound like the ***ministry of John the Baptist***—
the messenger to prepare for Jesus?

And isn't it more ***hopeful*** to think of fire this way—
as in ***refining? Cleansing? Purifying?***

I was reading the Upper Room Disciplines on November 29th, and Ben Yasua-Davis wrote this about John's ministry:

*Johns' promise of judgment also contains **a seed of living hope**, if we remember that every healthy forest **requires an occasional forest FIRE**. Old towering trees can grow so tall that there is no room for anything new; every new seed dies on the dark forest floor. When that happens, **fire inevitably follows, opening up space and sunlight for the forest to remake itself**.*

What might that mean for us this Advent?

Is God wanting to ***transform some of our old*** habits, to ***make way for new life?***
Maybe God wants us to let go of fighting at the dinner table,
or worrying about the gifts under the tree!

Davis also writes:

*When we do not make room for the new, **God makes it for us**.
God burns down our long-held habits and ossified traditions so that something new can grow....*

*God does **not inflict suffering** in order for this to happen; our lives invariably encounter hardship, disturbance and loss.*

*If we listen to those moments... God will take the opportunity to **PRUNE** us back and help us grow in green directions again*

So, I wonder—*can we be open to NEW life*, in a *season of traditions*?
What does that *mean for you this Advent*?

John the Baptist says that *Jesus is coming with fire—a new way of life*.
So, can we be open? Curious?
And are we willing to *confess and repent*?
And allow God to work on us?
After all, *God isn't finished with us yet*—and that is great news!

We all need the work that God alone can do in our hearts.
We all need *pruning* of all the old harmful habits,
the removal of grudges we hold, the healing of hurts we have not surrendered.

We all need that *cleansing and purifying refiner's fire*—
because we are all broken, and imperfect.
The Bible calls this *SIN*.
Sin in the Bible is the tendency to miss the mark, and missing the mark.
The Greek word for sin, *hamartia*, means *exactly that—to miss the mark*.

Paul says in *Romans 7* that we are fallen,
and *we do what we know we shouldn't do*,
and the good we want to do is not what we do!

So where is our *HOPE*?
How do we get out of our old sinful ways of living?
We turn to *one person---Jesus Christ*.
That's the person John the Baptist is pointing towards.
Jesus. The Messiah. The Savior.
The one who brings us *new life, grace, forgiveness of sins, and a second chance!*
Talk about good news!

Our faith in Jesus is the *only thing that gives us the strength*
to *embrace new life, and leave behind* old broken ways of living!

I read somewhere this week, a man who said:
I am less of a mess and a jerk with Jesus, than I would be without him!
Amen to that!

We are made NEW with Christ in our lives.

Paul says in Philippians 4:13:

I can do all things, through Christ who strengthens me!

With Jesus as our Lord and Savior,

we are **FREE**—*free from guilt, shame, and condemnation.*

We are also free from separation—from God and one another.

We all have PAIN AND REGRET in life.

We all have things we wish we could **change**, things we wish we **had not done**.

Christmas seems to amplify that brokenness and pain.

Well, what if Advent was about **a fire that CLEANSSES all of that?**

What if this was a time to surrender the past, and embrace a new future—without all of that pain?

What if Christmas was about freedom? And grace?

The good news is, Christmas is all about that.

And **Advent is, especially.**

In Advent, the time of preparation for Christmas,

we are reminded of God's grace, the costly grace of Jesus Christ.

Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, that *grace is costly because it cost a man his life,*

And it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.

That's our promise this Advent.

So, let's not skip ahead to Christmas.

Advent is not Christmas.

It is the preparation for it, and we need this time.

Which means John the Baptist's words are all the more powerful to us today.

Because we live in the "**already and not yet**" world.

The kingdom that John announced, the kingdom of God that Jesus ushered in, is **already here—but not yet complete**—that happens when Jesus comes again.

We are waiting on **December 25th**, and also waiting on **Jesus' return**, to make all things right in this messy world.

That's what the beautiful vision of **Isaiah 11** that we heard really means—

It is the *peaceable kingdom* where even the animals who are enemies can lie down together, and children can play right beside them.

But do you know *when Isaiah's beautiful words were written?*

Not during a time of joy or peace!

It was a time of invasion by Assyria,
a time of great fear and despair for God's people.

And yet Isaiah writes of hope.

Not pie in the sky optimism, but hope.

Hope in God's promises of new life and a new creation.

How could he write that, at that time?

Well, he was looking *forward*, not back.

He was *standing on God's promises* for the future.

We too are called to *look forward, not back.*

We too are called to *stand on God's promises,*

the promises we hear from John the Baptist,

the promises we know from our Savior Jesus.

So let's *find something new to do this Advent*, and share it with someone else.

When my kids were small we would make *a birthday cake for Jesus*,

and sing to him on Christmas morning.

Some people choose to *forego traditional gifts*, and instead give an envelope with a description of what was given to someone in need.

What if the *gifts we shared*, were not material,

but instead were *promises of love, and peace?*

Friends, hear the *Good News of the Gospel.*

It's Advent.

It's time to *prepare the way* of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He is coming, and coming again—*with fire to purify and bring new life.*

It's time to *look ahead to new ways*,

And *let go of the pain of the past.*

May we all *surrender this season of preparation*,

and open our hearts to God's gifts of grace and peace.

For these gifts, all God's people can say, Amen.