

**Matthew 3:1-12** (*parallel versions in Mark 1:2-8; Luke 3:2-19*)

In those days, John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, <sup>2</sup>“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!” <sup>3</sup>Yes, this is he of whom this was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.” <sup>4</sup>John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup>Then Jerusalem, all of Judea, and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him. <sup>6</sup>They were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. <sup>7</sup>But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup>Therefore produce fruit in keeping with repentance! <sup>9</sup>Do not think of saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. <sup>10</sup>Already the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>11</sup>I baptize you with water for repentance. But the one who comes after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup>His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

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**Prayer of the Day:**

Hear our prayers, Lord Jesus Christ, and come with the good news of deliverance. Drive the darkness from our hearts and fill us with your light; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit one God now and forever. Amen.

**Verse of the Day:**

Alleluia. I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you. Alleluia (Matthew 11:10 cf. NIV)

**Sermon Text:**

Are you prepared? That’s a question that really demands more information doesn’t it? Am I prepared for what? Well Christmas is only three weeks away. Are you ready for everything that comes with that event and the events which always pack our calendars around it? The end of a semester is closing in on our high school and college students. Tests, papers all of the work that come with them, are you ready? Perhaps after all the busy of the season, you’re planning a little get away over Christmas break. Is everything in order for that? We’re only cracking the surface on the long list of things that for many can make this time of year one of the most stressful. I don’t mean to add to those levels this morning, but John adds something else to the lists of preparations. In the season of Advent, we speak of the coming of God himself, both at Christmas and again on the last day. John cuts through the harried frenzy of worldly Christmas prep and calls out the “*kingdom of heaven is near!*” ... “*Prepare the way of the Lord.*” But before we throw

up our hands and throw in the towel this morning because it's all just too much, having called out the warning, "**JOHN also TEACHES US TRUE PREPARATION.**"

John the baptizer is one of my favorite prophets. He lives in a world not unlike our own. There are many different groups who struggle for power whether it be political, social or whatever else one might pursue. Pharisees actively taught salvation by an outward keeping of the law, empty formalism and hallow traditionalism crowned their actions. Work righteousness has them adding all kinds of rules to God's Law which simply are not present. Of course on the other side there are the Sadducees were the free-thinkers of the day, they had begun setting aside the truth of God's word for the comforts of their mental pushups as they skirted God's Word to get what they wanted. In the end they become willing to deny the resurrection, angels, even the final judgment. If you didn't like what either of these groups were pushing then there was always the immorality and debauchery which was so prevalent in Rome. I suppose we might say that the people of John's day were occupied with themselves. Have I been good enough? Am I smart enough? Am I happy enough? Do I have enough? Does any of that sound at all familiar?

John is different. God's wants him to be. So He makes him a Nazarite. Camel's hair clothing and leather belts, uncut hair and living apart from the world with its vices and values. It gets attention. Of course the message grabs our attention even faster.

*"Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!"* summarizes his call to those who gather around. This self-centered lifestyle had led the people far adrift from the truth of Scripture. Have I been good enough? Am I smart enough? Am I happy enough? Do I have enough? The answer is no to all of it. Sinful from birth (Psalm 51:5) our righteous acts are like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). The mind of sinful man is death and hostile to God. It considers itself too smart for Him when the opposite is true (Romans 8:7,8). Corroded by the world even wealth, health and the fleeting happiness our world offers are simply meaningless (Ecclesiastes).

John's message, given him by a gracious God, would focus us on something far more meaningful. Repentance would admit that we are never enough. By ourselves we are never prepared. So John wakes up those gathered around as he swings the hammer of the Law at the spiritual leaders who had failed the people. *"You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup>Therefore produce fruit in keeping with repentance! <sup>9</sup>Do not think of saying to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones."*

Ah, but here is the rub. Even as we hear the words, Satan is tempting us. Those wicked Pharisees and Sadducees, John's right in going after them. Which is to say, we're different. We know better. Of course, the truth is we are not. Like Pharisees we've looked down our noses at neighbors whose lives cross our threshold of sinfulness. We've sneered when others would call us to repentance thinking ourselves more knowledgeable and while we do it, we begin like Sadducees to ignore the parts of God's Word we don't like, don't feel are any longer relevant or are just to inconvenient for us to follow. John's words then shake us to our core. *Already the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

You see, this is repentance as John is preaching it. It's a turning from our infatuation with ourselves and turning to the one worth focusing on. So John continues, *"<sup>11</sup>I baptize you with water for repentance. But the one who comes after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup>His winnowing shovel is in his hand,*

*and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”*

John says don't look to me, but look to Jesus. He's the real judge who brings real cleansing. He's the one who surpasses all others. Jesus produces fruit unlike any other because He is entirely focused on His Father's will which in turn is focused in love on others.

So He lives perfectly, rebuffing every evil attack of Satan which would tempt Him to think of Himself, on the power He possesses and the His own self importance. He willingly sets it all aside for you. That you might claim his work as your own, God is born humbly in a manger, and wisdom personified will grow in wisdom and in stature, rejected by the very people He created.

So that you might be cleansed, He'll endure the fires of the wrath of God. On the cross providing payment for every sin, for that of Pharisees and Sadducees, for Romans and for us. That we might be purchased in His holy precious blood.

That we might live with Him forever, we are baptized not only into His death but also into His resurrection that the Holy Spirit might grant and grow us in the gift of faith as heirs of the promises of eternal life as He gathers us to Himself.

Living in the repentance that the Gospel inspires, we will begin to produce the fruits of that repentance as well. Not outward fruits of self righteousness which proclaim us better than others but works inspired and directed by God which focus on Him and His love for us and show our appreciation in return. Works which acknowledge that I am nothing before this God, not even worthy of carrying His holy sandals but which find our feet moving in concert with His for all He has done for us.

This is the difference between those John would chastise and those he would baptize and it is the key to true preparation before a holy God. This is the message that levels the mountains of selfishness and fills in the valleys of self-righteousness and prepares us for the Kingdom of God.

Are you ready? There is much our world would use to distract us from the preparation that God points us to today. So God sends us His messenger with his call to repentance. It pulls us away from ourselves and turns us back to our God that baptized into faith, into Christ, we might live for him. Yes, John looks different, but then all of God's children will. Brothers and sisters, in Spirit inspired faith may we listen as **JOHN TEACHES US** about **TRUE PREPARATION**. Amen.