

There is no better Advent preacher than John the Baptist. He is the Forerunner - the one sent by God to prepare the way for God in the flesh, as prophesied by Malachi. When an important dignitary comes to visit, you prepare. When your parents or your in-laws come to spend Christmas with you, you sweep out the house, you dust, you scrub. God comes to us, He comes to dwell among us in His gracious visitation, and John, as with all the prophets, calls us to do the same for our hearts. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." It is by repentance that we "**Prepare the way of the Lord.**"

*Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding!
"Christ is near," we hear it say.
"Cast away the works of darkness,
All you children of the day!"*

John called sinners to repentance. This solemn warning was for everyone. John did not play favorites. The everyday people were called to repent. The religious elite, the Pharisees and Sadducees, don't escape. They come in mocking curiosity and John calls these false teachers a "brood of vipers." He tells them to "**bear fruit in keeping with repentance.**" Don't just repent with your mouth, turn from your sin. To every sinner who thinks he can say "Sorry" to God, yet go on sinning, thinking that God won't mind, John gives the solemn warning: "**Every tree...that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**"

And if the temple establishment cannot escape John's indictment, neither will the politicians and kings. Neither will Herod Antipas, who treated holy marriage with contempt by living with a woman who was not his wife. And we today in this country have far exceeded Herod in sins against God's good gifts of marriage and children. Call anything a sin, call any sinner to repent, to turn from what they are doing, and you will be looked at askance, yelled at, told to shut up, given labels aplenty. John was thrown into prison for it. That is where John sits in today's Gospel: in a prison cell for speaking God's truth about marriage.

And he asks a question. He sends his disciples to ask Jesus: "**Are You the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?**" John had spoken of the one greater than he, who would baptize "**with the Holy Spirit and fire,**" who would carry a "**winnnowing fork...in His hand, and...clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.**" But John, the Forerunner, sits in prison. The faithful messenger wears shackles. Where is the judgment, the swift witness against those who did not fear the Lord? Where is the relief? Perhaps the Messiah, the One who was to come, is yet to come.

There is no better Advent preacher than John the Baptist. He is willing to wait. He teaches us to wait. Not just to hold the horses on Christmas, though we do need to do that. Before we celebrate the birth of the Savior, we need to recognize that we need saving. But John also teaches us to wait in midst of prison. This preaching is for the times when we catch ourselves wondering if this Jesus whom we have seen and heard really is the One. Because by now your stress level is likely rising. You still need to finish the letter, the cookies, the menu planning, the travel arrangements, and purchase the rest of the gifts. The nostalgia of Christmas which you used to look forward to and love is bittersweet this year because you will not spend it with the person you always spent it with. Their phone call will not come this Christmas Day. The hopes and joys you anticipated having this year not only didn't pan out, they came crashing down. Like John, we, in this vale of tears, must wait. We never get over the stress, it simply lowers a bit until the next trigger. We never get over grief. And the hurts never totally heal, they just scar over.

And maybe you wonder if this year, in the face of all this, the message of the infant of Bethlehem, of Jesus of Nazareth, can possibly compete or bring relief. There is no better Advent preacher than John the Baptist. Even in prison he preaches to us through his question. In prison, with questions, even doubt, and the certainty of impending death, he directs his question to Jesus. He teaches us to whom we are to look and from whom we are to hear. And from Jesus through his disciples, John hears the reassurance of who Jesus is. He is the One who gives sight to the blind, who makes the lame walk, who cleanses lepers, who gives hearing to the deaf, who raises the dead, and who preaches good news to the poor. Jesus is quoting Isaiah's prophecies of the age of the Messiah, what the Messiah will

do when He comes. He directs John to the promises of God, given in Holy Scripture, which John has heard, learned, and known, and now fulfilled in what Jesus is doing.

Jesus has done what it was promised the Messiah would do. The Lord has come as long promised. And in hearing this, John is still the best Advent preacher. And what he preaches, what he exemplifies even today is joy. Recall when he was yet an unborn child, who leapt for joy in his mother Elizabeth's womb at the voice of Mary, the one in whose womb dwelt the Messiah. Before he could even speak, John took joy in the Christ, the Messenger of the Covenant, that in Him, His coming birth, His preaching, His ministry, His suffering and death for sinners, and His triumph over the grave, our Father in heaven is pleased with us, loves us, and works all things for our good. John preached that joy to his mother with his kick of delight. As an aside, here we see that God bestows the gift of faith which recognizes and rejoices in Christ even upon the unborn.

John, sitting behind the iron bars of his prison cell, preaches joy. And through that word, this word, that Jesus has come, this is who He is and this is what He has done, your eyes that would fail to see any reason to rejoice this Christmas are opened to see the

*noble Guest through whom the sinful world is blest,
Who came to share your misery
That He might share His joy with thee.*

Your ears which Satan would stop up with the though "Yes, I've heard all this before," are opened to hear anew what Jesus Himself says; that He

*is the Christ, our God Most High,
Who hears your sad and bitter cry;
Who will Himself your Savior be
From all your sins to set you free.*

And where you are paralyzed by doubt and sorrow, where you lie poor in spirit, in the prison of a tortured mind, Jesus' words, what He has done for you, that He comes even now in His gracious visitation of His body and blood to lighten the darkness of your heart, uplift you in the joy that He alone can give:

This joy is not the same as happiness. We all too often seek and stake our lives on the latter. But happiness does not last this side of eternity. Here I am going to admonish the parents. This is why you need to bring your children to church on Christmas Day. Do not teach them that the happiness of getting presents on Christmas Day is better, is more important, than the joy of being in God's house, hearing Christ's words, and receiving His gifts. Give them, teach them, the joy of Christ that lasts, not happiness of possessions that need batteries, break, and don't endure.

This Sunday reminds us all that while in this life happiness fades, it ebbs and flows, the Christ has come to bring joy. It is a joy that comes from knowing that because of Jesus our Father is faithful to His promises. The Savior not just of the world, but of you, has come. It is a joy that releases us from the prison of our sins and bondage to Satan because of what Jesus has done by His death. It is a joy that bursts the gates and fetters of iron not only of our real worldly sorrow, but will also, on the last day, burst death itself, because Jesus has risen from the dead.

John eventually gave his head, his very life, as a witness to the Christ and the truth of his Word. But his voice is not silent. He not only preaches to us this Advent from his words in Scripture, but he even now joins his voice to all those who are in perfect joy and happiness already, the bliss of heaven, to which we also are joined. Our voices ring not just within the rafters of this nave, but up into the eternal arches of heaven itself. For in Jesus, our source of true joy, we are one church, one choir, comprised of all those pleasing to the Lord, who have been refined and purified in the blood of Jesus. Here, at this altar, is our treasure and joy: Christ Himself. He is not only near, he is here, just as He has promised. And as sure as He is here, He is certain to come again, to usher in that eternity of joy and bliss.

Come, Lord Jesus! Come quickly!