

242 The Best Worst News

(Note: This blog entry is based on the text "The Best Worst News", originally shared on November 30, 2022. It was the 242nd video for our YouTube Channel, Streams of Living Water (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCB7KnYS1bphKaL2OseQWCnw>), co-produced with my wife, Rev. Sally Welch.)

Christmas Day will be here in a little more than three weeks. Did you just tighten up a little bit? There is a lot to do. We're getting ready and almost all of our preparations are totally beside the point. Today we're going to find out why.

Today, we're going to get some advice on how to prepare for Christmas from a guy known as John the Baptist. It might be the best worst news ever. It comes from John's counsel in one of the Bible readings for this coming Sunday, The Second Sunday of Advent, and we're going to hear more about him on the Third Sunday in Advent. "Advent" means "coming" and we're going to be hearing a lot from a guy who was pretty much homeless. This best worst news will show us how to prepare in this season of preparation for the coming of Jesus,

Matthew 3:1-12 begins with these words:

¹In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

John was a relative of Jesus. They were almost the same age, so he was around 30-years-old when he "appeared". He preached out in the boonies and people from all over, from all walks of life, came to hear him.

His message was simple, and it's the only way to prepare for Christmas, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*

Jesus had been born and was now beginning his public ministry. The history of salvation was coming to its purpose, the kingdom of heaven had drawn near.

You think that there're a lot of expectations surrounding celebrating Christmas? How would you get ready if you know that God was coming? Repent.

Jesus brought the same message when he began his public ministry. Jesus sent his 12 disciples out with the same message. It was the theme of the first Christian sermon. It was the first word Paul used when describing the Good News.

It's not a word we use much anymore because it has been associated with a manipulative "turn or burn" approach that obscures the meaning of the Gospel, the good news. Repent.

And it's widely misunderstood as only saying, "I'm sorry." That's not what it means to repent.

Repentance means life transformation. It means to change one's thinking. It means to turn around. It means receiving the gift of new birth, of becoming a new Creation, of turning toward the new life God gives through faith in Jesus Christ. It means becoming a new self.

Have you ever made popcorn?

My mom used to make it by pouring the hard popcorn kernels into a pan, then covering the kernels with oil, then covering the pan and putting it on the stove. Now we pull out a package and put it into a microwave oven. Some microwaves come with a "Popcorn" preset.

Popcorn turns inside out under heat. Heat causes the moisture in the hard kernel to expand and then explode, transforming the kernel into something that can bring nourishment.

The Holy Spirit is the fire that transforms the hardened hearts of human beings.

Author and theologian Leonard Sweet describes the popping process as completely transforming the kernel's purpose. What was hard becomes soft. What appeared lifeless explodes into something that can feed people.

That is what it means to repent.

Our relationship with God is broken. Our rebellion against God brings evil into the world, as it has since the beginning. Sin is separation from God. Repentance is God's gift that leads to the reconciliation made possible by Jesus' death on the cross.

Repentance is turning toward God, and as we who are Christians are at the same time saints and sinners, we all need to repent. Regularly.

That is our best preparation to celebrate the first coming, or advent, of Jesus and to be ready for his second coming to judge the world.

Most people don't like to hear that they are wrong, and John really piled it on. But people were drawn to him. They had been longing for God's promised Messiah, the deliverer, for 1,000 years, since the time of King David. Yet their rebellion had continued. The one nation of 12 tribes split into two, Israel and Judah. Israel had been conquered and assimilated by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Judah was conquered by the Babylonians and taken into captivity in 586 B.C. The Babylonians were conquered by the Persians, the Persians were conquered by the Greeks, and the Greeks were conquered by the Romans, who were still occupying Israel when Jesus was physically present on earth.

God had not spoken through the prophets for 300 years, and one was supposed to appear to prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

That's why the next verses in our text carry so much weight, in **Matthew 3:3-6**

³This 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.'" ⁴Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

My dad had a nice camel hair sport coat. It looked good on him.

That was not what is meant about John's appearance. John wore roadkill, skin from the carcass of what he found in the desert. He foraged for what edible things were available in the wilderness to help him survive.

Can you imagine what it was like for John's mother when she gathered with the other women at the public well to draw water? When she was asked how John was doing, I wonder if she dropped her head and said, "He's living in the desert, wearing skin from dead camels. He's eating bugs! We're so worried!"

Yet people were coming out to hear him speak! Was he the one they had been waiting for for 50 generations? Were they the generation that would see the Messiah! They were getting ready! They were confessing their sins!

John wasn't currying their favor. He wasn't doing any marketing at all.

If fact when what we would call today the "influencers" came out, he said this to them, in **Matthew 3:7-8**,

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

It's not enough to say we have repented. Repentance means a new direction and movement toward God. Paul describes the fruit of the spirit in **Galatians 5:22-23**,

22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

And yet, we fail to be the people we have been created to be, equipped to be, and sent to be: the people who we are in Jesus Christ. We are saints and sinners.

I often think of Pastor Ingqvist, the pastor in Garrison Keillor's mythical Minnesota town, Lake Wobegon, who began an Advent sermon with a proposal. "This Christmas, I propose that we resist the temptations of our world to make Christmas about the things we can buy. Let's make it less about the gifts we give and more about the gift God has given us in Jesus Christ." And just then his gaze fell to the row in front of the pulpit where his five children were mouthing words at him. "No! Dad, no! No!"

We all get sucked into the preparing-for-Christmas machine and come out of it slightly more processed and the worse for wear, pledging to do better next time.

When that happens, all we can do is to remember that we are God's redeemed, and that our preparations for Christmas are not always the best, but that the calls to holy living from John the Baptist and Paul may seem like the worst news we can get, but are in fact the best news of all: Christ is born, Christ is Risen, Christ will come again.

We are saved by faith, through God's unearned love for us simply given.

That faith comes as a gift, one that we are reminded of at Christmas.

We prepare by abandoning all pretense that we are getting only what we have earned.

What is the result of claiming some presumed status before God? We hear it in **Matthew 3:9-10**,

⁹Do 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. ¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

I once heard a story about the development of the Christian Church in Indonesia. The seeds of the Church were planted by missionaries, but it had grown into an independent church, with its own schools and seminaries. It was financially independent and had developed its own cultural identity.

During the pre-Christian era, Indonesians were identified as having the religion of their parents by birth. God stood above the parents, and the children below them.

But when the Indonesian church composed its statement of faith, they included the words, "We believe that God has no grandchildren." That is, that we are not Christians because our parents are Christians. We are Christians because we have received the gift of reconciliation through faith. We been reconciled to God through Jesus' death on the cross. Each of us. Each of us has had the relationship with God for which we were Created, restored. Our actions flow from that relationship with the one true living God. God has only children.

Why is this the worst best news? Because our cultural association with the word "repent" makes this text from Matthew seems harsh, but it is the key to life, "*for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*"

John's relationship to the coming new reality in Jesus Christ is made clear in the concluding verses from this text, in **Matthew 3:11-12**,

¹¹I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His 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."

We are not who we were created to be, but we have been redeemed by Jesus Christ at the cross. How do we get ready for Christmas?

I saw news stories about Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving. It's called "Black Friday" because people spend so much that day that merchants hope that their finances will turn from being "in the red" to "in the black" this year. I also saw that there is so much surplus inventory this year that businesses will probably offer Black Friday deals all the way up to Christmas.

Nevertheless, some people were shopping around the clock on Thanksgiving night through Black Friday. Are they prepared?

We prepare for a different Christmas.

We prepare our hearts to make Him room. We prepare by living the redeemed life that is our gift from God. We prepare for the inbreaking Reign of God, the already here but not yet perfected Reign of God. We long for it and for our eternal salvation. The Kingdom of God has come near. We see it in Jesus Christ, and we stay ready for his coming again.

We prepare, between the two Advents, by sharing the best worst news that the end is coming, but that we have been fully prepared by the love and the grace of God