

Preparing For Jesus

42. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. (Matthew 24:42-44. NRSV)

16. John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (Luke 3:16-17. NRSV)

Message 6

REPENT!

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Matthew 3:1-12

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Introduction:

We spent the last two weeks looking at the preparatory prophet that God sent to pave the way for the coming of Messiah King. In advance of the coming of Messiah God rebirths the spirit of prophecy.

17. **With the spirit and power of Elijah** he will go before him (Luke 1:17. NRSV)

We've looked at the prophet now this week I want to look at his message. I want to show you the message that God sends into the world to prepare people for the coming of Jesus. We believe that the first coming of Jesus is our interpretive lens for correctly anticipating and preparing for the second and final coming of Jesus, amen church? Amen. So we are interested in this message and we anticipate the return of it in our days. Open your Bibles to Matthew 3:1-12.

1. In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 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 the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6. and they were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 7. But 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? 8. Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9. 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; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11. "I baptise 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 baptise you with 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." (NRSV)

In the Bible the first words out of a prophet's mouth usually tell you all you need to know about their message. So it is here. The first word out of John's mouth when he burst out of the desert wearing his camel hair pyjamas and reeking of locust stew was "REPENT!!" No opening illustration, no attempt to bond with the audience, he just stumbled out of the desert yelling: 'REPENT you brood of vipers or you are all going to HELL!!!!!!' That is right out of the seeker sensitive handbook isn't it? He was not invited to guest on Larry King, let me tell you. But that was the message that prepared people for the coming of Jesus and believe you me, it will be the return of that message that will prepare people this next time around. So let's pull it apart and try and understand it because we have not heard anything like this in a really long time.

The Kingdom of God Is At Hand!

The first thing that we need to understand is that John's message was rooted in the deep belief that the Kingdom of God was at hand. There is a funny Greek word there that your Bibles struggle to translate. It is the word *h0/ggiken*; 'the kingdom of God is *h0/ggiken*. What does that mean? You NRSV and NIV folks will have 'the kingdom of God has come near', you NKJV folks will have 'the kingdom of God is at hand' and you Message people will have 'for the kingdom of God is a wonderful place where everyone eats ice cream and wears striped pyjamas!'. Who knows what is that thing – MERCY! Lord, save us from these paraphrase translations! Anyway, the point is that in the Jewish mindset there were two kingdoms – the kingdom of this world and the

kingdom of God. The kingdom of this world was supposed to be run by who? By us. We've talked about this before, the Bible says:

26. Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; **let them have dominion** (Genesis 1:26. NKJV)

We were supposed to rule this planet, as God's sons and daughters. Dad was going to rule the cosmos, which he is still doing an excellent job of, but he created this little rock for the kids to try their hand at dominion. It was set up as an apprenticeship. We would walk with God in the cool of the day and he would give us wisdom and council on how to rule and lead. Well you know how this story turned out, we made a very bad decision and tried to rise above ourselves. We ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil so that we could BE LIKE GOD making our own moral determinations. In that moment of catastrophic failure we lost our right to rule this earth and – SWOOP! Satan picked it up. He is now the ruler of this world. That is the truth and Jesus did not dispute it. When Jesus was tempted in the desert Satan offered to give him dominion over all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would but worship him. Jesus didn't fall for it, but he also did not dispute that Satan was the present ruler of the world. Let that sink in. The point is, there are two worlds and this one was supposed to be ruled by man but because we dropped the ball – literally- Satan picked it up and now it is ruled by him.

But I said there were two kingdoms. God was not content to leave things as they were so he began building 'an away team'. He began building an alternative community that would be birthed by people who wanted to walk with God and wanted to live as leaders UNDER HIS LEADERSHIP. And that kingdom would do war with the old kingdom and our kingdom will win because God wills it and he has stacked the deck in our favour.

Now the Jews have been waiting for this kingdom and watching for it. They knew it would begin with a righteous king. You can't have a kingdom without a king. In fact the word 'kingdom' literally means the domain of the KING. So the kingdom begins with a king. So in advance of the king, God sends a herald. Everybody knows that a king has to

have a herald and John is the voice of one crying in the desert saying: ‘Make way for the KING!!!!’ When the king is coming, then the kingdom of God is at hand.

Pick A Side!!!

The second thing he says is basically this: PICK A SIDE!! The Bible portrays the inbreaking of the kingdom of God as being something small that grows into something big. This alternative kingdom is literally birthed right under the nose of its enemy. Satan sees it – he see the city on a hill that cannot be hid. Imagine if a city just sprung up outside of Washington D.C. It just appeared overnight like it had arisen from another dimension. Its people looked like aliens and they had a forcefield around it that could not be penetrated by any form of warfare we possess. Would that concern the government of the U.S.A.? It might. That’s what Jesus did. He came and birthed a city. Matthew says:

14. "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. (Matthew 5:14. NRSV)

You are the beacon, the first dawn of the kingdom of God. You are the city on the hill. The enemy can see it but he can do nothing about it. The city cannot be defeated. Jesus said:

I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18. KJV)

Satan can attack and snarl and growl about our city all he wants but he cannot win. He has no weapon left in his arsenal that is effective against our provision. The Bible says:

15. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it. (Colossians 2:15. NRSV)

Our enemy is naked and unarmed! Imagine if in addition to waking up and finding an enemy city had sprung up from another dimension right outside your own capital, the President of the United States also discovered that over night, every tank and turret in his arsenal had been spiked and ruined. He didn’t have a single functioning weapon left in

his army. Right away he would realise that he is facing a superior foe and he is in serious trouble.

So the kingdom of God is like a city birthed in enemy territory. But it doesn't stay a city – it grows! Jesus said:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32. it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." (Matthew 13:31-32. NRSV)

I've told you before that in the Bible the 'birds of the air' usually symbolise the nations of the earth. So Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God is like a city – like a small seed planted in enemy territory and it grows and grows and grows until it swallows entire nations! The kingdom of God is like this expanding blob that threatens to take over the entire earth. Like yeast working its way through a batch of dough.

Now at some point the world is going to realise that they need to band together to fight this foe. The great news friends is that the enemy is hopelessly divided. What would you expect from spirits of division and dissension? Do you think they place nice with each other? The Bible says that the only thing that will bring them together is the realisation that the kingdom of God will soon reach the tipping point and when they see that coming they will band together and attack. The Bible says this again and again. Jesus said that the trigger for the Day of Wrath would be the completion of the task of world mission, he said that in Matthew 24. In Revelation 11 we have it described in a pictorial vision:

7. When they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, 8. and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that is prophetically called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. 9. For three and a half days members of the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb;

Let me just interject here. There is some argument in the scholarly community about what exactly is being said here. Some scholars, not the majority but in fact a small minority, say that God is talking about two actual prophets. The literal return of Elijah and Moses. Two super prophets will rise up, complete the task of world evangelism and

then be killed. But that interpretation completely ignores the Old Testament imagery behind the vision. If you read Zechariah 4, which I referenced last week, you realise the two olive trees are two anointings that are poured back into the church to restore her light and witness. By the way, the language only supports that position. The Greek here literally says THEIR DEAD BODY – not bodies, BODY will lie in the street. Now it would be a strange couple of prophets who shared one dead body. This is obviously the church as a collective whole. The church is THE BODY of Christ and when she has finished her task of Gospel proclamation, she will be slain by the united enemy who rises from the pit. Let's keep reading:

10. and the inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and celebrate and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to the inhabitants of the earth. 11. But after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and those who saw them were terrified. 12. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here!" And they went up to heaven in a cloud while their enemies watched them. 13. At that moment there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. 14. The second woe has passed. The third woe is coming very soon.

15. Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever." (Revelation 11:7-15. NRSV)

Our Bible says that the story ends this way: a revitalised church completes the task of world mission and kingdom expansion. An embassy of the kingdom is planted in every nation on the planet and the appeal goes out to all people. When that is done, the enemy unites in a last ditch effort to shut this thing down and they slaughter the messengers. They think they've won. They think they have pulled this thing out of the fire. But then the unthinkable happens. The King returns. He raises up the church in a great resurrection and he marches into his city and he sits down and a trumpet sounds declaring: 'The kingdom of the world has become the Kingdom of our Lord and Messiah and he will reign forever and EVER!' Hallelujah! Everything goes back to the way it was meant to be.

God made this world to be ruled by a man who was full of his spirit. And so it shall be. Who will reign over this planet in the eternal kingdom of God? The God-Man Jesus

Christ. Born of the flesh he will rule in the flesh and every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that HE IS LORD! Amen church? Amen.

So what does John advise us to do? PICK A SIDE!!!!!! Pick a side friends. When the king comes everyone will be wheat or chaff. There will be no barley, no rice and no hybrid GMOs. You are wheat or weeds and you will be given a fate commensurate with your identity at that moment, so pick a side.

Boy does the church ever need to hear this today. Who even knows what side of this thing we are on anymore? Can you tell? Half the time you walk into a church and you don't know if you are in the kingdom of this world or the kingdom of our God. They are playing Beatles songs, or some cross dressing dance troop is lip syncing a Beonce tune and you wonder: what in the world is going on here? The church is trying to stand with one foot in the kingdom of God and one foot in the world under this misguided notion that this serves the cause of evangelism! It doesn't! When these churches are honest enough to do research they discover that they aren't producing any real fruit, they are attracting selfish Christians from other flocks who are attracted by the higher level of service and flashier presentation. All we've done is mix the world and the church and thrown away our saltiness. Jesus said:

13. "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. (Matthew 5:13. NRSV)

By the way, just before the story we looked at about the revitalised church reaching the world and then being visibly destroyed do you know what the Bible says has happened?

1. Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, "Come and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, 2. but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample over the holy city for forty-two months. 3. And I will grant my two witnesses authority to prophesy for one thousand two hundred sixty days, wearing sackcloth." (Revelation 11:1-3. NRSV)

Just before the revitalised church, brought back to life and power in her witness through the outpouring of two great anointings – just before she rises up to complete her task; LOOK AT WHAT HAPPENS!!! She is divided. God cuts the church in two. The real

church, the sanctuary is measured off and the false church, the court of the gentiles is TRAMPLED UNDER FOOT. Where have you head that before? That is what is done to the church that has lost her saltiness. The half-world half-church is cut off BY GOD and left to be trampled by the world.

So pick a side my friends and make sure you do not stand too close to the line.

Bear Fruit

And don't just whisper your choice in the quiet place of your heart, BEAR FRUIT WORTHY OF REPENTENCE. John was the least seeker sensitive preacher of all times. He had this huge crowd of people coming and some of them were fancy people, the sort of people everyone would want in their church. The leaders of the people, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were coming to get baptised and listen to John's welcome:

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8. Bear fruit worthy of repentance. (NRSV)

John says: 'I'm not interested in your limp wristed confessions of faith! Don't you dare raise your hands at my meetings! Go and bear fruit and then maybe we'll float you a balloon you snakes and serpents!' That is straight out of the seeker sensitive play book isn't it? He made it hard!!!! John was not a 'raise your hand at camp' kind of guy. He was a 'show me your faith by your works' kind of guy.

Listen to me church, there is a lesson in this for the church today, living as we are in the shadow of Christ's coming. Its time to stop making it easy. Easy doesn't work. Easy is a trick of the enemy. Easy puts a whole lot of people in danger. There are so many people in the church today that think they are saved because somebody made it easy for them. Somebody said to them back in Sunday School or at camp or at church even: 'Just believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that he was raised from the dead and you will be saved. Just confess that you are a sinner and he will accept you. Lean on his grace.' That sounds pretty good doesn't it? In fact, I bet some of you are wondering what my

problem is because that is the exact Gospel presentation that caused you to raise your hand. But there are two things missing. And before I tell you what those two things are let me ask you: what do you call a truth equation with two pieces missing? You call it a lie. The two missing pieces are REPENTENCE AND FRUIT. Think about it friends, even Satan himself BELIEVES that Jesus is the Son of God and that God raised him from the dead. That counts for nothing! That is just an observable fact. The Bible itself says that it counts for nothing:

19. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe--and shudder. (James 2:19. NRSV)

James is going even further with this than we are going. He says: 'You believe that God is one.' That is Jewish short hand for 'you have good theology'. The Jewish statement of theology, their central creed that they recite day after day is called the shema. 'Hear O Israel. The Lord our God, the Lord is One.' The Lord is one. You've got your theology down my friends! Well so do the demons. The demons know more about God than you do and they shudder because they are all destined for the fires of hell. Correct belief is not faith. You have to add FRUIT. The Bible says:

17. So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:17. NRSV)

Faith that does not result in changed, victorious, fruitful living is DEAD! It is not of the Spirit of God because everything planted BY GOD GROWS AND PRODUCES FRUIT. That is why Jesus said:

19. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20. Thus you will know them by their fruits. 21. "Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. 22. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" 23. Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers." (Matthew 7:19-23. NRSV)

You've got to have fruit or your confession of faith is invalid and dead. And as Bryan Adams reminded us back in the 80's, tears are not enough. You might say to me: 'Oh Pastor! My faith must be real, I felt it so keenly. When I confessed my sins to Jesus

years ago, I cried and cried and cried and I FELT his forgiveness, I just know I did.’
Hmm. But did you know that in the Bible we are told that sorrow can be misleading:

10. **For godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation**, not to be regretted; but **the sorrow of the world produces death**. (2 Corinthians 7:10. NKJV)

The Bible is very clear that there are two types of sorrow, one is godly and it leads to REPENTENCE UNTO SALVATION. The other is worldly and it leads to death. So how do you know which kind yours was? Simple, by whether or not it produced repentance. Did you keep on doing what you were sorry about? If you did, then it was worldly sorrow and you are still dead in your sins. Or did it cause you to turn away in disgust (the definition of repentance) and embrace a new way of life through God’s grace? That is repentance and that is salvation.

By trying to make it easy for people; by saying: ‘Just believe that Jesus existed and was raised from the dead and cry a little bit over your sins and raise your hands at the meeting’; by making it easy we have led people into death and we have sent them to hell. And God doesn’t like it. So in advance of his coming he will send back to the church the real message. It is wildly un-seeker sensitive. It begins with the word: ‘REPENT’ and it demands fruit as proof of salvation.

Conclusion: Become The Message

I want to finish up this morning by looking once more at the package. I told you when we began this morning that for the first two weeks we looked at the prophet and then this morning we are turning our attention to the message and that is mostly true. But any good journalism or media student will tell you it is impossible to separate the message from the messenger. The messenger IS the message. And so it is here.

Look at what we are told about the bearer of this message:

John the Baptist appeared **in the wilderness**... (v.1. NRSV)

Now John wore **clothing of camel's hair** with a leather belt around his waist, and **his food was locusts and wild honey** (v.4. NRSV)

John WAS the message. He appeared out of nowhere, stumbling out of the desert where he had been living on locusts and honey. Here is the point church: HE LIVED LIKE HE BELIEVED THE KINGDOM OF GOD WAS AT HAND. His life was a rebuke to all those 'so called believers' who were living like everything was hunky dorey. His life asked the question: 'Why do you like this world so much? Why do you eat its food and drink of its vine and enjoy its comforts? Do you not know that this world is NOT the kingdom of our Lord and God? Do you not feel repulsed by its festivals, sickened by her songs, nauseated by her values? How can you live like this IS LIFE?' John's life asked those questions and if the church is going to be able to contain the message that will go forth in advance of Jesus' Return we need to ask those questions again. The Bible says:

15. Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; 16. for all that is in the world--the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches--comes not from the Father but from the world. 17. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever. (1 John 2:15-17. NRSV)

Oh church! We don't look like desert prophets anymore, we look like Wall Street Bankers. We live in their houses, drive their cars, eat their food and drink their wine. We watch their shows and listen to their music and we celebrate their holidays overtop of our own. Let me ask you church: Whose Christmas will you celebrate this year? Theirs or ours? Will it be the babe in the manger that takes centre stage in your home or the Mall Santa and his bag of materialistic excess? We need to begin living like we really believe that this world and the desires OF IT are passing away. We need to love the lost but we need to hate what is killing them. We need to become the message.

I want you to think about that for the next few days. Think about whose world you live in. Think about whose festivals you celebrate and whose values you follow. We have to become end times prophets to carry an end times anointing. Only those in the desert have the clarity of vision to see the approach of the king. Those who live in Babylon are blinded by neon light. They are deafened by the din and noise of pointless human activity. They are intoxicated by pleasure and they have gorged themselves into stupor.

Its time to pull out. The Lord has come with a rod to measure his people because a message is about to go out and it will not go out through the pampered peacocks of the half-Christian church. Jesus said that:

Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8. What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10. This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." (Matthew 11:7-10. NRSV)

The message of preparation did not go out through the soft or the flexible the first time. Nor will it this time. It is an old time message of absolute truth and eternal urgency. It will require the return of desert prophets who feel distinctly uncomfortable with the ways of the world. This is the church about whom it is written: 'See I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare the way of the Lord.' Even so, come Lord Jesus. Let's pray.