

# 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 7

### Clearing The Stage

December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009

John 3:25-31

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### Introduction:

Jesus said John the Baptist was the greatest man born of a woman. Today I'm going to show you why. Open your Bibles to John 3:25-31.

25. Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. 26. They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him." 27. John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. 28. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, "I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him." 29. He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. 30. He must increase, but I must decrease. 31. The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. (John 3:25-31. NRSV)

We are going to hit the ground running this morning because we gave some important time to some fellowship matters today and so you are going to need to pay attention.

John the Baptist, the preparatory prophet was a great man who was greatly used first and foremost because:

## **1. John knew that behind every great man of God there is a great gift FROM God.**

In the Greek of verse 27 it literally says: ‘It is not possible for a man to receive anything except that it is given to him from heaven.’ God makes men and women what they are. The truth is men and women who are greatly used by God tend to receive a lot of praise and recognition. There is a sense in which that is appropriate. The Bible tells us as Christians that one of the ways we rebuke the rebelliousness of our culture is by showing honour to our leaders. The Apostle Paul says to the Roman church:

outdo one another in showing honor (Romans 12:10. NRSV)

Honouring our leaders is a great witness to our culture so it is good for us, but it is often bad for those who receive it. Many great men of God have allowed themselves to be destroyed by the honour they received. They forgot that behind every great man of God is a great gift from God. You cannot do anything except that God gives you a gift to do it. Remember the story of the talents that Jesus told in Matthew 25? The servant who produced a five talent return off of his five talent deposit has to understand that if he had not been given a generous deposit to begin with, he would have NO RETURN over which to exult! John was greatly used by God because he was greatly skilled at deflecting the praise he received back to the one to whom it was truly due.

Let me tell you one of our goals for our church. People are starting to talk about our church. The message is out there that God is doing things here that are not often seen. People are talking about our outreach to the poor and the widows in the city. People are talking about the people coming to Christ. People are talking about the high percentage of those people coming under focused discipleship through Mile 1. Our Mile 1 resource was made available online through Arrow ministries and it was the most downloaded resource in their history. It may be in use in 100 churches across North America this week. People are talking about that. They are talking about resources that are flowing into this place and they are talking even more about how those resources are flowing out into other churches. They are talking about the partnerships that are happening here with

churches from other denominations. They are talking about all of that and I'll tell you something, that frightens me. We need to become very good at deflecting praise where it truly belongs or it will all come to a crashing halt, believe you me. I want to give you permission to do something: if you hear me telling a story that seems to imply that I am responsible for something that is going on here I want you to slap me hard across the face. Then quickly give me a hug so I know that you love me, but I fear the wrath of God more than I fear the sting of your rebuke. I want all of us to grow in giving praise where it is due. Amen? God does what he does and he blesses what he blesses and the only thing we usually contribute is the proper assignment of praise.

## 2. **John knew who he was and who he wasn't.**

That, by the way, is the true Biblical definition of humility. Romans 12:3 says:

3. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. (NRSV)

Paul says that humility is about having a sober assessment of what grace you have received, neither too high nor too low. Don't have the beer goggles on thinking that you are this great teacher or prophet when in fact you are not. But likewise, do not underestimate yourself and thereby rob God of ministry. John did not consider himself as nothing, he knew he occupied a pretty lofty role. He knew he was ministering in the spirit of Elijah as the preparatory prophet. He knew he was the focal point for 400 years of Jewish hope. He knew who he was. John actually uses an interesting term to describe himself in verse 28. In the Greek of verse 28 John describes himself using the word: *apostellw* from which we get our word 'apostle'. John was an apostle. He was sent by God with authority. He knew who he was.

He also knew who he wasn't. 'I am not the Messiah' he declared in no uncertain terms. Many a great man of God has failed to make that clear to his people. John had the

wisdom to say: 'I am a servant, I am not the master of the house'. Such men continue to be used.

### **3. John knew that the church was not a gift to him.**

Look at verse 29. I don't want to be Captain Greek Pants this morning ok but I want to show you something. When I read this verse the other day in the original language I almost wept it is so beautiful. I don't want to be one of those guys who is always droning on about the Greek this and the Hebrew that but sometimes reading the Bible in English is like kissing your wife through a sheet. There is an element of beauty that is missing. So bear with me. In verse 29 John literally says: 'The one who has the bride is the bridegroom' and I am not he. There is a wistfulness about his statement that puts you in the front row of a Jewish wedding. In my seminary years I had a friend who was an orthodox Jew and he told me once about orthodox Jewish weddings which he claimed were unchanged in over 2000 years. An orthodox Jewish wedding is very Jewish and not very Victorian English, if you catch my drift. After the ceremony the friends of the groom pick him up on their shoulders and they take him to a room where there is wine and beer and they sing bawdy songs about – marital interaction shall we say. Meanwhile the ladies help the bride get into – marital attire shall we say. All the while giving her sage and probably awkward advice about – marital interactions. When the men figure that the bride has had enough time they march into the room and pick up the bride onto their shoulders – so now the young bride and groom are both being bounced around on drunken shoulders – and they deposit the young couple into the bridal chamber where they are required to consummate the marriage while their rowdy friends bang on the door and shout advice and sing songs. Welcome to Palestine my friends! Whether it was exactly like that or just mostly like that, John puts us in that scene when he says wistfully: 'The bride is for the groom, and I am not he.' This beautiful, young, blushing woman is not my gift, she is my friend's gift. Doesn't that take your breath away? No wonder Jesus loved this man!

John knew what we don't know: the church is not a gift for us. We think the church is for us. We think that we should go 'church shopping', trying on different congregations like sweaters to find one that fits. Blasphemy!! You do not try out the bride of your friend! You do not handle her like some cheap piece of cloth in the market place, remarking on her flaws before you move on to the next option. The Bride is not for you, it is for Jesus.

Jesus loved John and called him friend because he understood that the Bride was for Jesus and he treated her with respect. Do you want to be used greatly? Then love the church and stop commenting on how she fits you and meets your needs or how she fails to. She was not designed to meet your needs. She was designed to become the partner of Jesus and how she meets your needs does not concern the Lord and he is offended when we ask such questions. When you come to church your only thought should be how can I help to present the Lord with a beautiful bride this morning? What attitudes should I wear? What ministries shall I provide him? What song should adorn my mouth? Those are the questions asked by the friends of Jesus.

#### **4. John's emotions were perfectly tuned to Christ's.**

Look at what John says in verse 29:

The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. (NRSV)

Wow! You get the sense as you read these words that you are in the presence of a great man of God don't you? John is saying that all of his emotions are in response to the voice and demeanour of Jesus. 'If he is happy, I'm happy, if he is angry I'm angry. Today I am happy because Jesus is looking at his emerging bride and his face is full of joy. Today is a good day.' That is the testimony of a true friend and loyal servant. Too often our emotions reflect our circumstances. 'Why hasn't God healed me or found me a job or fixed my wife? Until he does what I want I'm going to be bitter and unhappy.' Such people are not greatly used and neither are they friends. The definition of 'friend'

in the Bible, by the way, does not imply being casual with Jesus, it implies having a more intimate connection.

14. You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. (John 15:14-15. NRSV)

This concept of friendship is right out of the Old Testament:

14. The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them. (Psalm 25:14. NRSV)

John understood that you can only be God's friend if you watch his face and respond to his emotions. Responsive people are drawn in to deeper intimacy and disclosure.

I want to confess something to you church; I have a lot of room to grow in this area. My emotions are somewhat tuned to the emotions of Jesus but they are not tuned enough. I still get sparks from things that are of me, that derive from my desires, not the desires of Jesus. Sometimes I catch myself having an emotional reaction to things that don't touch the heart of Jesus. I'll look at the stats sheet and see that we topped 500 people and I'll feel a twinge of excitement. Why? What if 40 of those people were angry, unrepentant sinners who did not come here for grace but rather to disrupt the purpose and pleasure of the Lord? Why do I care about such things? Jesus didn't, he sent the crowds home all the time if he felt like their attitudes were askew.

Last Monday I was feeling pretty good about our Sunday service. It was the first snow of the year and we still had a really healthy number of folks out and I felt good about that. Worship went well despite our stage being a mess and full of seasonal equipment. Communion went long and yet the children's ministry people did fine and managed all the variables. That's a good Sunday! Then a woman came into my office and she wept on my couch. When I asked her what was wrong she said that she had cried herself to sleep on Sunday night because during communion God had let her feel his heart and he was devastated that so many took communion with bitterness and anger and petty feuds

being harboured in their hearts. It was like a punch in the stomach. Why hadn't I felt that? How did I miss that? My face was not on his face and my emotions were not reacting to his emotions. I need to change on that and I suspect some of you do too.

## **5. John knew when to exit stage left.**

Look at verse 30:

30. He must increase, but I must decrease." (NRSV)

John was the greatest man in the history of God's people, so Jesus said and yet he ministered publicly for just a few short months. His impact in that short time was MASSIVE. Even the Jews who do not love Jesus acknowledge John as a super-prophet. In fact they like John far more than they like Jesus. The Jewish historian Josephus gives a massive amount of print to the story of John the Baptist and to Jesus he gives just a few short lines. My point is simply this, John was a huge personality, he was a rock star. He was the most famous Rabbi in the land and it must have been obvious to him that he could rise as high as he wanted to, but instead he said: 'I think I'm in the way here. People are looking at me when its time to look at Jesus', and he exited into the shadows. Wow!

God uses people who get that they are not the show. The moment you think you are the show, the moment the Spirit leaves you and you are on your own. The Holy Spirit will not help you steal spotlight from Jesus. There is a time for great men to step into the shadows if they are stealing notice from the Christ. Men follow men, people follow people and so human leaders need to think through ways to maximise impact while minimising spotlight. If you apply yourself to this challenge, you get to stay in the game. If you don't, then you don't leave the stage you are knocked off the stage; something we've seen happen far too often recently.

**6. John knew that the good things of this earth are less than the great things of heaven.**

Verse 31 brings this forward:

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. (NRSV)

All the great leaders in the kingdom of God have preferred the message of heaven to the message of men. The Apostle Paul said:

4. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5. so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God... 13. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. (1 Corinthians 2:4-13. NRSV)

God uses men and women who prefer the sound of God's voice to that of their own. The church is dying from the excess of the council of men! I am so sick of sermons that offer pithy advice on finance or wise commentary on the popular books and movies of the day. Who cares what I think? Why would you wake up early and drive through the snow to listen to my thoughts? Come only to this place if you are fed the truth of heaven! Come only to eat of the bread of life that is the Word of God. The kingdom of God is birthed when the Word of God comes down and takes root in human hearts. Refuse to hear of anything else in the house of God. Amen church? Amen.

**Application:**

I want to change gears here. Very quickly in the time we have left I want to apply some of what we've seen in this great man of God to our preparations for Jesus. This is an advent series, I don't know if you know that. Advent is not really about candles and Christmas carols – though those things are fine, theologically advent is about preparing for Jesus by contrasting his first and second comings. It is about holding up the lens of his first coming so that we are ever prepared for his second and final coming. So we have been looking at how God prepared people for the first coming – the first Christmas.

Let's use the lens of what we've seen today and just take a look at how we do Christmas today, 2000 and some odd years later, closer than ever before to the second and final coming. I just want to ask you three questions that flow very naturally out of what we've just seen. I won't teach on each question, I am just going to put it out there and let you stew on it. Fair?

**Q1: Do you want what Jesus wants this Christmas?**

We talked about how John was a great man greatly used by God because his emotions were perfectly tuned to the emotions of Jesus. He wanted what Jesus wanted and so when Jesus got what he wanted, John was content. So let me ask you, what will make or break your Christmas this year? If, like John, your joy is perfectly tuned to the face and emotions of Jesus then the question is really: 'What will make HIS Christmas this year?' What will make Jesus pleased at my Christmas celebrations? Plan around the answer. Would he be pleased to see me read the Christmas story to my children? Then do it. Would he be pleased to see me helping out with the Christmas Eve dinner for the homeless being planned by the Stewarts and the Leatherdales? Then do it. Would he be pleased to see me sponsoring a Family Circle family and providing some gifts and toys to other folks? Then do it. Do what will make him happy. Make his Christmas. Want what he wants.

**Q.2 Are there some things which need to diminish or disappear this Christmas in order for Jesus to take centre stage?**

I want to talk about Santa here for a minute. Santa is not evil and we probably don't need to kill him off entirely. Santa, which is a perversion of the name St. Nicholas was a real person, he was a priest who sold his possessions when entering the priesthood and he used the money to bless the poor in this parish. At Christmas he would go and leave presents for the poor children on their window sills. That is a great story and I am all for keeping it as part of our celebration. Examples of godliness should be preserved within the church. If you don't believe that read Hebrews 11. But. Santa has grown too large.

He occupies too much stage and if he was here today I bet you he would say what another true man of God said:

He must increase, but I must decrease. (John 3:30. NRSV)

I want to challenge you to do less Santa this year. You don't have to kill him off entirely but I think its time to start telling the true story, not the ridiculously expanded version with reindeer that fly and little green men who help Santa break into our homes at night. It is time to put this nice man back in his rightful place. He is not the Messiah. It is not his birthday we are celebrating. He must increase, Santa must decrease.

**Q3. Are there good things of the earth smothering your appreciation of the great things of heaven?**

Good is often the enemy of great, I am not the first one to say that but it needs to be said. Good things are plenty at Christmas time. Getting together with family: GOOD THING. Christmas parties: GOOD THING. Decorating Christmas trees and putting the little angels on there and the lights: GOOD THING. Buying a few presents for family and friends as a reminder that God has been good to us and has given us many good things: GOOD THING. Living Christmas Tree recitals where the community joins with us to sing the songs of the season and to warm the heart for Christmas: GOOD THING. BUT. BUT. Too many good things squeeze out the great thing. The great thing is that God ENTERED IN. God took on flesh and dwelt among us. He lived, he died, he rose again and he ascended and he has taken his seat at the right hand of God and he gives of his SPIRIT THAT WE MIGHT ENTER IN TO THE DIVINE LIFE OF GOD. That is the great thing and we are in danger of missing it every year because we have burdened ourselves with many good things. Here is my challenge: edit out some of the good things of Christmas. I'm not angry at Christmas trees or Christmas parties. I'm not even angry at reindeer, though dancing snowmen I can do without. I'm just saying that good is the enemy of great. Get rid of some good and focus on the great this Christmas.

**Conclusion:**

We've used up all our time and then some. I like John The Baptist. I know that his message is a little bit frightening and he lacks some of the polish and personal skills that we've become accustomed to but he was a great man who was greatly used by God in anticipation of the coming of Messiah. I want to be like that. I want our church to be an attractive option for God as his eye wanders to and fro across the earth looking for a vessel for his purpose. I want his eye to stop here. So I submit to the scrutiny of this prophet. I submit to his loud clarion call to REPENT! I submit to his strange appearance, I submit to his locust smelling breath and I submit to his humility and his love for Jesus. Sit with me here. Let us sit in the shadows and celebrate the Christ at centre stage. Let our needs and our agendas and our good things decrease and let HIM INCREASE in this place and unto this city for the glory of God. Amen? Amen.