

## Discover the Promise of Christmas

Matthew 3:1-12

Most, if not all of the leftover turkey has been eaten. Black Friday sales are mostly over. The decorations are up all over town and in the stores. We're stuffed and either glad the relatives have finally left, or we're saddened because they could not stay longer. Those are the telltale signs that Christmas is right around the corner.

We are in the Season of Advent in the Church. It is a season of promise and a season of preparation, preparation to receive the Promise of God for the world.

The Advent season is that time to prepare our hearts and homes for the birth of the Christ child. It's that time when we put all the decorations in their place, get all the presents bought and wrapped, make sure the Christmas cards are sent out and received and all those other things we do to get ready for Christmas Day.

But it's about more than that too. It's about preparing ourselves and our families spiritually. You see, if we aren't careful the time of preparation will be over, and the big day will be here and all of a sudden, it'll be just another day.

We'll finish opening all the gifts; the room will be strewn with scraps of wrapping paper and ribbon; the turkey or ham will have put up a valiant fight but be nothing but leftovers; and we'll be parked in front of the TV watching one of the games or a Christmas movie. Then all of a sudden that empty feeling will hit us. That feeling of "What's the use?" That Charlie Brown feeling of something missing as if we were thrown into Christmas too fast. That's when we'll realize we needed time to prepare.

Into the midst of all this preparation, all the Joyous Christmas Carols, the lights, the parties and all the celebrations of Christmas comes this voice. A strident voice that seems to show up every year like some unwanted uncle who makes everyone feel uncomfortable. Into the midst of our preparations comes John the Baptist. You know the story.

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 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.'" Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 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? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 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. 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. "I 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. 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."

What in the world is that all about. Smack dab in the middle of Silent Night and Away in the Manger, weird Uncle John in his thrift store rejects stands up and starts hollering about repentance.

Well, John the Baptist is and was just doing his part. His words echo the words of the prophet Isaiah: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John came during the time of Christ and appeared in the wilderness to call the people to a time of preparation. His purpose was to announce the coming of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. Because they forgot. In 30 short years, they forgot the promise. And that's John's purpose. John comes each year in the midst of our celebrations, because we forget the promise, too.

Through the words of John and the other prophets we are reminded that Jesus didn't just suddenly appear. God didn't just suddenly decide to drop in on the kids for a surprise visit. No, God felt the alienation which had built between God and God's children and God agonized over it. Jesus was the long-planned answer to end that alienation and bring about reconciliation. John and the prophets simply call us to remember and once again prepare our hearts for the birth of Christ.

The signs are all around us. And we know how to read the signs of Christmas don't we? Sort of like the Dunkin Donuts sign, right? We know when the doughnuts are hot and fresh don't we? There's no doubt. And it's the same with Christmas. You'd have to be dead not to know that Christmas is coming.

We know the signs of Christmas. Almost since Halloween, the commercials on TV have been focused more and more on Christmas. And now that Thanksgiving is over, they'll really start ratcheting up. The problem is we get so bombarded with Christmas songs and holiday cheer in all the commercials that it almost works like a vaccination against the season.

As we prepare, it's time to rummage through the boxes and trunks in the attic of our minds and spirits and dig out the trunk labeled Christmas Memories. It's time to dig out and open that drawstring sack of hope and promise and carefully pour out its contents.

Then with equal care so that none of the fragile memories are broken or destroyed, we read, scan, open, study, peruse, and sift through all those old memories and old feelings so that we can open up both old and new vistas of God's love and grace. We open and rummage through all those old feelings and memories so that we can recall and be called back to our faith and our relationship with Christ.

And we have to rummage through, we have to dig out those trunks and sacks and boxes and bags that we said we would never forget or never put away. But we did. We put them up in that certain place so we wouldn't forget. But you know what happens every time we do that don't you? The operative word is forget.

So, we come to worship, we come to the programs at Church and in our families, we watch old movies like It's A Wonderful Life, Scrooged, A Christmas Carol, National Lampoon's Family Christmas Vacation and A Christmas Story with Ralphie and the Red Ryder BB Gun.

We even watch some the TV specials trying to recapture that elusive feeling. We come with longing. We come to the Advent season hoping that God will once again meet us face to face while we're bent over the manger cradle making goo goo eyes and silly noises to entertain the newborn infant who is the Son of God, the King of Kings, our Savior.

We come to Worship and to all the activities knowing that we need to be prepared. John's words have echoed in our ears and in our thoughts all year long. And so, we seek to prepare. We know this time is God's time. This moment is God's moment. All of creation groans in expectation of what is about to unfold and what is yet to be. And we don't want to miss the Promise.

The Promise of Christmas which God made is really very simple and yet as complex as all of creation because at a certain moment in time, God took off the royal raiment of heaven and put on the rags of our flesh and blood and come to live and dwell among us. And he came as a helpless, innocent, vulnerable baby. And yet that child held and embodied the Promise of the ages. The promise of Salvation and Reconciliation.

And somehow, we realize that we need exactly what was promised. As much as we deny it, as much as we've tried to do avoid it over the years. There is an innate part of us which realizes we can't do it on our own.

I love that last line, "And perhaps, even in our best moments what the camera captures isn't the image of a perfect family as we are, but the possibility of what we can be through the hope that Christ brings."

That's why it's so important for us to Prepare, so we can once again hear and assimilate the Promise and the Hope which goes with the Promise.

Christmas enters our lives not in great leaps but in quiet moments that we can miss if we're not prepared. In Mark Jesus tells us "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come...And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

In other words, Jesus calls us to be ready, to be prepared so that we don't miss the glorious Good News and Promise of this season.

Prepare your hearts and homes this season. Spend time in prayer and devotion. Read the passages from Matthew and Luke dealing with the birth of Christ. Prepare yourself for the birth of Christ so you don't miss it. .