

Advent's Prophetic Hope

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning to you all. We had brunch yesterday at our house and some of you came and ate with us and I just wanna say thank you for coming and helping to bring the joy and the cheer and that sense of community and connection into our home.

We had a wonderful time. And one of the topics of conversation, at least in the kitchen where some of us were gathered, was the topic of the AI Jesus. In Lucerne, Switzerland, they have developed and put out for public interaction what people are referring to as an AI Jesus.

They took a language model, an AI language model, a lot like ChatGPT, and they trained it using machine learning on a bunch of religious texts. And then they set up a hologram, like a screen of Jesus's face behind a lattice screen in a confession booth.

And he's open for business. And so people can go and they can sit in the booth and they can have conversations with AI Jesus. And it answers questions and offers various religious platitudes.

And there's been a lot of interest in this. Close to 1,000 people apparently over about a two-month period wanted to come and have a conversation with AI Jesus. And as I have read about this and tried to understand more of the project and the intentions behind it, a couple of things came to mind.

[1 : 2 5] Number one, this shows how spiritually hungry people are. There's a lot of interest. And even though these people are talking to a computer, when they come out of the booth and they're interviewed, two-thirds of these people say that they had a religious or spiritual experience.

The majority of people say they had a spiritual experience. And it shows, I believe, that people are longing for some sense of connection to something transcendent. They're longing to connect to something or someone bigger than themselves.

That's the first thing. Second thing, it made me wonder this question. What if someone went into that booth, but instead of an AI hologram, they actually encountered Jesus?

What if Jesus was in that booth? I wonder what they would say to the interviewers when they came back out. I wonder if they would give the kind of reports that they have given to the reporters.

And then it made me ask this question. What if that happened to us? This is the topic that we're gonna be exploring this morning as we look at chapter three in Luke's gospel.

[2 : 3 6] And we're gonna be looking at a man named John the Baptist. His entire ministry challenges us to ask this question. Are we prepared? Should we encounter Jesus face to face?

Are we prepared for that moment? God has given John essentially one singular mission. Prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah. And John's message addresses two kinds of people.

So we're gonna look at each kind of person and what John has to say to them. And then our question is obviously, where do we fall in the mix? So let's pray. Lord, we ask you this morning to open your word to us, to give us hearts that are receptive to it, that whatever we need this morning, which only you know, that you would give that to us by your grace, that we would encounter you through your word.

And we ask this, that we would grow and our faith would be strengthened, that we would become faithful. But ultimately we ask it for your glory, Lord.

And it's in the name of your son that we pray. Amen. So let's look at the context of what's going on in this story. At this point in the gospel, essentially John has gone viral.

[3 : 5 3] I mean, he's blowing up, he's amassing all of these followers. He's the talk of the town. The big buzz is people wanna go see John. They wanna hear some of the things that he has to say.

Some people think he's a prophet, some people think he's crazy. Some people see him as an enemy and a threat, like Herod the Tetrarch. He's not like what he hears John saying because it has implications for him politically.

So we see at the end of the passage, she actually locks John up. So lots of reactions, lots of controversy. And for the most part, the people who are going out to see John are Jews. And for the most part, these people are excited about the possibility that the Messiah might actually be coming. And that's because of passages like the ones that we read this morning. Passages like the one from Zephaniah 3, like Psalm 85. These are songs about God's promise to bring salvation and renewal. And they're excited to contemplate. So these people who are going out to see and hear John the Baptist are a lot like the people who are going to see the AI Jesus. They're curious.

[5 : 02] They're hoping to see spectacle of some kind. They're maybe wanting to see something miraculous. They're hoping for some kind of spiritual experience. Maybe these are people who used to be serious about their faith, but they've faded away.

Maybe they're people who've never really been serious about faith, and they're curious. They want to know, is there something more to this? And so they're going out there hoping that something might happen. At least we'll make some memories.

So imagine their utter shock when John begins shouting at them about fleeing from the wrath to come. You know, they're like, is this, did we make a mistake?

Because that's not what they're expecting to hear. I remember an interview with a California resident who was trying to convince his neighbors to evacuate when a series of wildfires swept through Southern California.

He says, there we are begging people to leave, and they're not taking us seriously. We're begging our neighbors to leave, and they're not taking us seriously. He's like, they look like they're packing to go on vacation.

[6 : 09] Some of them are planning to fight the fire with a garden hose. And he says, they don't seem to understand. This is unlike any fire we've ever seen. And then he says, you know, the ones who listened to us lived, and the ones who didn't died.

So John's not being rude, and he's not just like somebody's crazy uncle who's just saying crazy things. John is sounding the alarm. John is saying to these people, don't you understand?

A fire is coming, and this is unlike any fire we've ever seen. He calls it an unquenchable fire. He's saying, you need to read these passages again in their context.

Zephaniah 3, Psalm 85. Yes, God has promised to bring salvation and deliverance and renewal, that in order to do that, God's going to come like a great consuming fire.

Everyone and everything has to pass through that fire. But as a result of that, all injustice, all evil, all weakness is going to be utterly consumed.

[7 : 15] And ultimately, this is good news for the world. This is why people like Herod, who are in political power, who are utterly corrupt, this is why they hated John's message.

Because it's a message that says, ultimately one day, all of those who are in power are going to be held accountable by the one true ruler and king of this world. So if you're poor, if you're oppressed, if you're a victim of violence, if you're a victim of war, the hope of God's promise to judge the evil in the world is unimaginably good news.

But the question John is challenging his people and us to ask is, yeah, but is it good news for me? Is that good news for us personally? That depends on one thing.

Are we prepared? Are we prepared? Are we prepared? For those of us who assume we are prepared, for those of us who would assume the answer to that question is yes, John would say, we're not.

Verses seven to nine. See, many of the people coming to see John assume that because of their Jewish ethnicity, their heritage, because of their great, great, great grandparents, that they're good with God.

[8 : 30] They assume that when the Messiah comes, he's gonna come and vindicate them, maybe even overthrow the Romans. They assume they're the ones who are gonna be celebrated and automatically welcomed into God's kingdom.

That's a lot like assuming that, well, you know, because I got baptized as a kid, my parents were serious about the faith, they went to church. Because I went to church occasionally growing up, because I give to charity that we're good with God.

I remember Warren Buffett saying one time he had given millions to charity and he was at this event and he said, you know, there are a lot of ways to get to heaven and this is a pretty good way. Now, he was more or less joking, but I think a lot of people think like that on a deep down level.

When you compare everybody, surely I'm on the, at least in the upper quartile, you know, compared to most people, I'm probably a pretty good person. But John calls people like this a brood of vipers. He says, you brood of vipers who warned you to flee from the wrath to come. He says, you assume that because you are children of Abraham that you're safe.

[9 : 37] But the fruit in your life would say otherwise. And what he's really saying, we gotta understand the meaning behind his word choice here. What he's really saying is, you claim that you're children of Abraham, but if you look at the fruit in your life, you look a lot like somebody else's children.

See, brood of vipers is a way of saying children of the serpent or children of Satan. And to be a child of Satan, to be descended from Satan, means that your heart and your life are rooted in the great lie of Satan, the serpent's lie.

Your life, your identity, how you prioritize your agenda, all of that is rooted in the great lie of the serpent. Notice that if you think back to the story in the garden, our first parents, Satan didn't tell Adam and Eve, hey, you should go out and do a bunch of bad things.

He didn't even really tell them to disobey God. That's not what it was about. All he says is essentially this. Why do you need God to rule your life?

God's great. God's wonderful. Yeah, he's amazing. But why do you need him to rule your life? Aren't you capable of doing that yourself? Wouldn't it be more convenient for God and for you?

[11 : 01] Wouldn't everybody be better off if you could manage your own life, decide for yourself what's right and wrong? Wouldn't it be better for you if you did that? Why not try to be your own God?

God. See, in their hearts, these people who are coming to John, many of them assume that they don't need God ultimately. They don't really need a Savior.

They don't need a Lord. They assume that because of their heritage, because they do things like go to synagogue and keep the Sabbath, they don't need saving. They assume, in other words, that they could be their own Savior.

And that's the lie of the serpent. You know, we also see the lie of the serpent show up when we say things like, no one can tell me how to live my life.

No one has a right to tell me what I should or shouldn't do with my money or my time or my body.

See, when we say things like that, when we say, you know, I would never believe in a God who would say this or who would ask this of me, who would say that this is not okay for me or would call me to this kind of life, when we think that way, when we speak that way, that's the serpent talking.

[12 : 15] We're trying to be our own God. We're saying to God, you know, I think I know better than you do what my life should look like. And this lie shows up in all kinds of unexpected places too.

It doesn't just show up in the kind of overt rebellion. It shows up in the most unexpected places. Just to take one example, let's talk about for a second chronic anxiety. And you say, well, now you're just gonna give me one more thing to worry about, right?

But chronic anxiety is different from other kinds of anxiety. Chronic anxiety is the kind of anxiety we feel that's based on things that are false or perceived. It's not like clinical anxiety or acute anxiety that you feel in response to real situations.

It's the kind of anxiety that results from our false beliefs, false needs, things that we're perceiving that aren't really there. And this comes, by the way, from Steve Cuss, who writes and speaks a lot on the topic of anxiety.

But he says, chronic anxiety tends to result from five false needs. Five false needs. Number one, control. I'm not okay unless I feel in control of the situation, in control of the people in my life, in control of outcomes.

[13 : 29] Number two, perfection. I'm not okay unless things are just right. Number three, having the answer. Some of us just need for people to know that we know.

You know, we wanna be the smartest person in the room. And if there's a question that comes up in a group of people, it just, and we know the answer, we just have to say it. It's like a compulsion.

Number four, being there for others.

This isn't just being compassionate. Some of us need to be needed. Some of us don't know how to be in relationship unless we are actively earning our spot in that relationship.

Some of us are not okay when other people are not okay. And we actually stress out about it more than they do. The need to be there for others. And number five, people's approval.

Some of us just cannot tolerate when someone else is not okay with us. We ruminate about it. We stress about it. So control, perfection, having the answer, being there for others, people's approval. [14:34] These things result in chronic anxiety. These are the things that we ruminate on and keep us up at night. But here's the point. Here's how it connects. Each of these false beliefs or false needs is actually an attribute of God.

Only God is totally in control. Only God is perfect. Only God is omniscient. He knows all things, has all the answers.

Only God is able to save and provide for everyone in the world. And only God is worthy of all of our praise and all of our worship.

The point is this. Our chronic anxiety stems from us trying to be God. rather than letting God be God and accepting our creaturely limitations.

That anxiety is like our heart telling us we are not made for this. This is above our pay grade. We're not equipped to be God. We're not equipped to live life this way.

[15:44] See, that's the fruit of the serpent's lie in our lives. When our hearts are rooted in the lie of the serpent, that bears fruit in all kinds of ways in every area of our life.

Just to summarize what we've just said, it shows up when we try to be our own saviors. It shows up when we try to live our lives as though God doesn't exist. It shows up in our priorities and in our agendas.

It shows up in our fears. And it shows up in our chronic anxiety. And it convinces us that while God is good for advice, while God may be a good source of comfort if you turn to the right scriptures, we should never, ever, ever let God rule our lives.

That we're better off calling the shots. So for those of us who assume that we are prepared to meet Jesus when he comes, John challenges us to ask, what does the fruit in our lives tell us about our true roots?

Among these people in the crowd, there are some people who are more prepared than they know to meet the real Jesus when he comes. And those are the people who ask, what then shall we do?

[17:05] See, here's the point. For those of us who assume that we are prepared, we are likely not. But for those of us who believe or suspect that we may not be prepared, we are actually more prepared than we think.

Because asking, as these people do, what then shall we do? What shall we do? That's taking the first step of genuine humility and readiness.

But by asking this, by simply articulating the question, we are acknowledging, number one, our need for change.

Number two, the fact that we need help outside of ourselves. I know I need to change and I know I need something that I don't have in me, which runs against the popular belief that all the answers can be found within.

No, I don't have whatever it takes. I need help. You're on the right path. And the word that John uses is the word repent. He says, bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

[18:12] Now what is repentance? Well, it's really helpful in telling that John is using here the metaphor of a tree. That should tell us something very important. At our old house, we lived there for 10 years, we had a crabapple tree in the yard.

And I think crabapple trees are nasty. People say you can do things with them, make jams or jellies, anything that you have to boil down and cook and add a bunch of sugar for hours and hours and hours.

It's just not meant to be eaten. I think it's nasty. On the other hand, I love peaches. And I remember every year I would look out and I was, man, I wish that was a peach tree.

Wouldn't that be amazing if in season we used all these peaches? I could eat peaches all day long. But every year, every season, nothing but crabapples. And no amount of wishful thinking is gonna change that fact because it's a crabapple tree.

And it can only produce one kind of fruit. And the same is true about our lives. No amount of wishful thinking, no amount of willpower can produce the kind of fruit that God desires.

[19:16] No amount of wishful thinking, no amount of willpower can produce the kind of fruit that God desires. Because it's not just about doing good works. God cares about our hearts.

He cares about our motivations. He says, you know, if I wanted children from Abraham, I could raise them up from the stones. If I just wanted good works, if I just wanted to solve problems in the

world, you know, if God just wanted to end poverty, he could do it like that.

It's not just about the good works. He cares about the motivation. He cares about the why. He cares about the heart. Here's the point. If my heart is rooted in the lie that I don't need God to be my savior and Lord, then what's the effect of my good works gonna be?

If my heart is ultimately rooted in the fact that I'm better off on my own, if my heart is rooted in this lie, when I go out and do a bunch of good works, what's the impact of that gonna be on my heart? It's gonna have the opposite effect. It's gonna push me further away from God. It's gonna confirm my seeking suspicion that I'm actually a pretty decent person. So it's not just about the good works. [20 : 38] If you want new fruit, here's the point. You need new roots. You need to become an entirely different kind of tree.

John says in verse nine, even now the ax is laid to the root of the tree. Right? We need to go all the way down to the core of our life and tear out the serpent's lie by the root.

We need to tear out that lie that I'm better off being my own God, that I don't need God to be my savior. And Lord, that has to go. We need new roots. So the question then becomes, how do we get new roots?

How do we become a new kind of tree that produces a new kind of fruit? And the answer, my friends, is Christmas. This is why Christmas is a holiday worthy of our celebration.

Before Jesus brings judgment on the earth, he is willing to endure judgment on behalf of the earth. Right? Before Jesus brings fire, he plunges into the fire on our behalf.

[21 : 49] That's what Christmas tells us. And John the Baptist says, you don't need my baptism. It's just a baptism of water. That gets you so far as to say, what then shall we do?

I know I have a problem. What should I do? John says, that's where human ability ends. You need something that only the Messiah can give you.

You need a baptism of spirit and fire. Now, he's using that same word fire. What's he talking about? When you're baptized, in other words, when you come to Jesus and you ask for forgiveness and you ask to be restored on the basis of what he's accomplished on the cross, what he offers is not just forgiveness, it's a new identity.

That's what baptism represents, a new identity. We become like people who have already passed through the fire. We become like people who have already passed through the fire, which means from that point forward, we no longer have anything to fear from the coming fire.

We've already gone in there. We've already endured it because Jesus has given us his identity. And so we know from that point forward that because we've been baptized with the spirit and the fire of the Messiah, we know that we will be part of this world when everything is made new.

[23 : 17] And because of all of this, Christmas gives us a new place to put down roots. Instead of rooting our lives in the lie that we are better off without God, we root our lives in God's mercy.

We root our lives in God's grace. That begins to be the thing that defines us. We root our lives in the truth that we need God every moment of every day. We root our lives in the truth that God loves us so much that he was willing to do this for us while we were still in active rebellion against him.

So this season we're in now, the season of Advent, is really an opportunity because it is so easy, friends, it is so easy to approach Christmas like the spiritual tourists who are going to see the Al Jesus.

Hoping to make some memories, take some selfies, maybe have a spiritual experience, maybe have our hearts slightly warmed.

But Advent is meant to awaken in us a sense of urgency. John the Baptist confronting us with this question, are we prepared to meet Jesus when he comes?

[24 : 29] Do we enter the season like spiritual tourists, like people who are just hoping for some new memories? Or do we enter it like people who know that our hearts need new roots?

So I invite you to take some time, I know it's a busy few weeks coming up, but to take some time, find some time, fight for it and make some time to pray.

Get alone somewhere where it's reasonably quiet, where you're reasonably not likely to be disturbed, and spend some time in prayer asking God to help you see the truth about your own heart.

Because God's the only one who can do that. Asking God to help you answer that question, am I really prepared? Asking God to help give you a newer, deeper understanding of the meaning of Christmas and the coming of the Messiah, what that means for you.

And if there are things that you need to hear from the Lord, so spend some time praying and spend some time listening. And seeking the hope that Christmas offers the world in your own life.

[25 : 43] Come Lord Jesus. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we know that you are here. And we know that you have come to us. And we pray now that as we continue in confession and prayer and song, we pray for an encounter with you.

As we gather around your table, we pray that we would meet you face to face. We pray that in the coming weeks, to those who pray and ask and open themselves to you and reach out to you, that they would find you there with a ready answer.

We pray that you would lead us all into a deeper faith that is rooted in the truth of your gospel. And we pray this for our own good and for your glory. In the name of Jesus, amen. Amen.

Thank you.