

Making Ready

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Date: 15 December 2019

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[0 : 00] Well, I want to echo Jeremy's welcome to you all and just say how wonderful it is to be together in Advent. I love Advent. It is a time of urgency.

It is something that makes you have a frame of mind like you hear if suddenly you know that your car has rolled into the beginning of a parking lot in the middle of it. There is a sense of urgency that comes to us through Advent.

And it's an urgency because Jesus is close. It's a time when we really recalibrate our lives again around Jesus and the fact that he will come again in glory.

That this is the great fact and hope and certainty that our lives are shaped around. So if there was a short theme for Advent, it would be three words, preparing for Jesus.

And really that ought to be the theme of our life every day of the year. That we live a life preparing for Jesus to suddenly come and come in glory.

[1 : 11] To bring his judgment and to make all things right. And so the collects for Advent, the prayers that collect all of our prayers each week, are something that we're going through in this sermon series.

All of them are about preparing for Jesus to come again in glory. So the first week of Advent, we prayed that God would help us to take off or cast off the works of darkness and put upon us the armor of light as we prepare for Jesus to come in glory.

And then last week, we prayed that God would so help us to read the Bible. To take it into the depth of our being.

That we would be able to embrace and hold fast the promises of eternal life that Jesus gives to us. And that he will give to us as he comes in glory.

And then this week, we pray for ministers. And I'm taking this prayer that we prayed. That we are all ministers.

[2 : 26] We are all stewards of the mysteries of God. Which is actually simply the saving work of Jesus. Of God that's shown to us perfectly in Jesus.

Finally revealed in Jesus Christ. And so we pray that we who know this good news, these mysteries, would be like John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus' first coming.

And so we pray that ministers would turn the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just.

That at Jesus' second coming to judge the world, we might be found an acceptable people in your sight.

That we are prepared to see Jesus the judge. And so this week in Advent, we are praying not just for ourselves, that we would help others, but instead that we are helping others to be prepared to see Jesus.

That's the prayer on the third Sunday of Advent. It's a call to be like John the Baptist. Talking and active witnesses to others about who Jesus is for them.

[3 : 37] We are asking God to work in us to help others to turn to Jesus. Now I want you to turn to Matthew 11, 2 through 15.

Because that collect from today is based on this Bible reading. And I'd like you to turn there because it strengthens us in our witness to Jesus.

Jesus does that as he tells about John the Baptist in those verses. And there's three things he teaches us.

The first thing he does is he teaches us about John's doubts. John's doubts about Jesus, which is really important for us. And then secondly, Jesus teaches, he makes clear who John is.

And then finally, he teaches us about our immense privilege. And that's how we'll end the sermon. So I want to begin with doubt.

[4 : 39] And we don't think of John the Baptist as being somebody who is a doubter. We think of somebody who is strong, who preaches God's word with confidence and great authority.

But you can see in verses 2 and 3 that John was in prison. And he had heard about what Jesus was doing in his ministry. And he sent his followers to Jesus to ask an important question.

Are you the one who is to come? Or shall we look for another? Now those are words of doubt. John is asking Jesus, are you actually the Messiah that I've been telling people about?

There were real doubts in his mind. He had understood from the Old Testament prophets that the Messiah would bring release to the captives.

Why am I in jail? He had preached against Herod. He had preached against the sexual immorality that was defining his life.

[5 : 41] He was preaching about the need for repentance. Not just for the little person. But right up to the king of Israel. And now John was experiencing failure.

He had had a huge effect on the people of Israel. As thousands had come out to hear him preach. Many had repented and turned their lives towards God. And now his ministry seemed to be over.

No more preaching. He had known Jesus as a little child. And all through his life, God had shown him that that boy and then that man was the very son of God.

That he was the longed hope for Messiah. He had devoted his life to prepare people to receive Jesus as God himself. Come to us.

And he had promised that Jesus the Messiah would bring the fire of judgment. Why hasn't Jesus brought God's vengeance? His judgment against the Romans who ruled Israel.

[6 : 47] Against this immoral king, Herod. Instead, Jesus was spending time with insignificant people. He was bringing healing to them.

He was spending a lot of time eating with immoral people. And outcasts. Sinners. But he wasn't bringing the golden age of Israel.

So his fundamental question was, Why hasn't God made all things right in Jesus? I should be enjoying the blessings of Jesus' perfect rule right now.

That's why he's doubting. And if you're a follower of Jesus, you and I can relate to John the Baptist. We know Jesus. We believe in him. We devote ourselves to him.

But he does not make all things right. It doesn't happen. We wonder why his timing is so different from mine. There are many times when my expectations, my hopes of God, are not met.

[7 : 50] You might have prayed and God did not seem to answer. The mission of the church is not flourishing as it should be. Perhaps we're wondering, Why aren't people responding to the message of Jesus in greater numbers?

We have prayed for a loved one. There hasn't been healing. I continue to experience pain in some of my relationships. There is difficulty that I face.

There hasn't been healing. And so you share the doubts of John when you experience this. But Jesus speaks into John's doubts.

And he speaks into our doubts as well with a message that he gives to John through his disciples. It's in verse 4. Look at this.

He says, See what Jesus is saying here.

[9 : 07] Is that he, the Messiah, utterly transforms people's lives. He brings light into the darkness. He brings life to the lifeless.

He gives purpose, a deep sense of purpose, to those who are aimless. He brings hope to those who have absolutely no hope at all.

And this can only happen because he is the anointed king that was sent by God. He is fully God and fully human.

And he has come to rescue humanity from their sins. To bring peace with God by the forgiveness of those sins. So you see, he doesn't bring an end to this world with its suffering.

He comes into its darkness. He brings the light of his loving presence. And changes people from the inside out in the midst of the worst of circumstances.

[10 : 12] This is the good news that God is preaching to the poor. You see, Jesus hasn't made all things right. He is making all things right.

And he will complete that work on the last day. When he brings a new heaven and a new earth in his judgment. In his glory.

Where creation will be healed. So he says, I am the light that comes into your darkness. Your present darkness. And he finishes that deeply reassuring message to John and to us. By saying, blessed is the one who is not offended by me. Now this is a word for this generation. For our time right now. Because it is very, very tempting to be offended by Jesus.

And what I mean by that is looking at an example that we see in John. For John that meant that Herod who was holding him prisoner would not be judged yet.

[11:12] In fact, Jesus was going to Jerusalem to preach good news to the unrepentant. And to die at the hands of deeply sinful people.

You will, however, he says to John, know the deep goodness and the blessing of God himself. As you put your trust in Jesus the Messiah.

In the midst of your darkness. In the midst of your imprisonment. He is telling John, and he tells each of you today. It is always, always worth holding on to Jesus.

And his hope. That hope will never disappoint in the long run. It is the certain hope. Because it is Jesus himself.

John's disciples bring that vital message back to John. And it is something that would have brought light into his darkness. But at that moment, Jesus turns to the big crowd.

[12:18] And in verses 7 through 11, we see Jesus' clarity about who John is. He seems like somebody who is defeated. Somebody who is weak at that moment and doubting.

But Jesus raises John up in these next few verses. And in doing that, I want you to notice that he is also talking about himself.

Because Jesus tells them, what did this crowd, what did you all go out to the desert to see? When you were out there with thousands of other people who made that big, uncomfortable journey.

Why did you go away out there? Did you go out to see a reed that was shaken by the wind? And what they meant by that was, did you go out to hear a preacher who was influenced by every wave of thought and political correctness and popular opinion that existed at that time?

Did you go to hear somebody who tells you words that you love to hear? No. No. They had heard enough of that kind of preaching.

[13:22] And we have a lot of that kind of preaching in our time now as well. Instead, what John was doing was preaching that they were filled with a spiritual sickness.

That there was rebellion against God in their hearts. And he was calling those people to return to God and away from their sinful ways. To come to God and embrace him who is their true king.

And he named the religious leaders in this. He said, you need to repent and come to God in humility. It's offensive preaching. But it is preaching that goes deep into one's heart and mind and soul.

And people came to hear that. And then Jesus said, or did you go to see a man in soft clothing? In other words, this is a wealthy, smooth-talking preacher.

Somebody who is successful. Who is in the royal court. Somebody who you can look up to with the right appearance. With the right clothing. And he gives you hope of greater success and wealth and influence in this world.

[14:29] And they had heard a lot of that as well. A lot of those kinds of promises. But no, John had nothing. He was dressed in camel hair.

He ate locusts and wild honey. He offered no worldly gain at all. In fact, in his message, he was calling people to radically give up anything necessary.

In order to please God. To prepare for Jesus' coming. So he's offering a hope that is not found in the world at all. But only in the man from heaven.

And people flocked to hear that. Then what did you go out to see? If it wasn't a wealthy, smooth-talking man and somebody who told you what you wanted to hear.

A prophet? Well, the crowd is silent at that point. Because they are thinking in their hearts, a prophet is exactly what we wanted to hear. It's been 400 years since a prophet has brought the living word of God to us.

[15:31] They were hungry for that word. And Jesus said, yes, I tell you. And more than a prophet. John was more than a prophet. Well, what did Jesus mean by that?

What he meant is the prophets spoke messages from God to change hearts and bring repentance. And John did this, too. But there was more, much more.

Because Jesus said, in verse 10, that the prophets were speaking about John when they said, Behold, I, God, send my messenger before your face, who will prepare the way, your way, before you.

Now, John was doing something no prophet had done. He was preparing people for God himself to come to Jerusalem. He was preparing people for God to be in their very midst to change everything about their lives as he comes to Israel.

No other prophet had this privilege and this responsibility. God was near. He was coming. The greatest thing that could happen in this world is what John was pointing to.

[16:47] God come from heaven to earth as Emmanuel, God with us. And Jesus goes further. He says in verse 11, Truly I say to you, which means it's critically important that we all know this, Among those born of women, there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.

Now, do you see what Jesus means here? The thing that makes John great, the greatest man up until then, is that John is pointing to Jesus, who is God and man.

Jesus is Emmanuel. God loving us to come to his people to save them. There will be no other prophet because Jesus is the last word of God.

He's the perfect revelation of who God is for us, of his love for us, of his saving work in us. All of God's promises, his character, all of his purposes are fulfilled in Jesus.

And that is the clarity of Jesus. Not only about John, but about himself. No ordinary person could say those things.

[18:04] His glory makes John great. And that brings us to the last point. Because Jesus teaches something extraordinary at the end of verse 11 that has everything to do with your immense privilege.

Having said that John is the greatest, he says, Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. So here's where we come into it.

How can this be? He's saying, Jesus is saying, if you have put your trust in him, if you've come under his rule and follow him, Jesus is speaking to you.

You are greater even than John. Even if you have started believing in Jesus today at this service, you are greater than John.

How can that be? Well, it's because you have witnessed the risen Lord Jesus in your life. And John never experienced this.

[19:06] He died before he could see Jesus die for the sins of the world and rise in great power and be glorified and give the Holy Spirit to people as they believe. This is good news, as Peter said in our first reading, to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.

And they are things into which angels longed to look into. This is the privilege that you have. You are looking into these things that angels long to look into.

But John did not experience this new life that Jesus brings people as they are born not only of a woman, but of the Holy Spirit, born again. If you put your trust in Jesus, you know all this to be true. You experience Jesus' work in your life. You have much more to tell about Jesus than even John because you can point to the risen, glorified Jesus who will come again in glory.

And so as we leave this passage, the question that we ask is, how does this affect each of us today? What does this have to do with my weekly life?

[20:17] Well, I think, first of all, John is our great role model. His whole life was defined by Jesus' coming.

You know, towards the end of this passage, God promises to send Elijah again, just before the great and awesome day of the Lord. And you find that in the last two verses of the Old Testament. And Jesus quotes this. He says in verse 14, John is Elijah. And he says he's Elijah because his whole life, like Elijah, is a sign to the world that Jesus was close, that the day of the Lord was at hand, that it all comes together in Jesus.

And so the implication of our being greater than John is that all the parts of our life are meant to be signs to the world that Jesus is at hand.

We are like John and Elijah in that way. He has come to earth to save us. He will come in glory to judge the world one day, and he makes all things right on that last day.

[21:28] And in this in-between time, Jesus is perfectly close to us. He dwells in each of us by his Holy Spirit. We cannot escape the fact that Jesus is near to us.

John's life is all about bearing witness to that close Jesus. Our life is meant to be all about pointing to that Jesus as well. Speaking of him, living for his coming, preparing others to see that Jesus is the coming of Jesus and his nearness the most important thing in your life?

That's what John's example asks us. Do you seek to prepare to see Jesus as you love them, as you serve them, and as you speak to them? C.S. Lewis wrote a very, he gave a very, very famous sermon called The Weight of Glory.

And at the end of that sermon, he said this. He said there are two destinations that people are moving towards. Either they're being transformed by Jesus forever in heaven as their destination, or they are being separated from God forever, and the spiritual darkness that goes with that.

Those are the two destinations of humanity. And he said all day long, in some degree, we are helping each other to one or other of these destinations.

[22 : 57] It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, and all politics, that we are helping the people in our life towards Jesus and his goodness, his healing, the transformation that only he can bring, the hope that changes everything.

It's not easy to do this. It's not easy to witness to Jesus. As verse 12 says, Jesus suffered great opposition and violence when he brought the kingdom of God. John was imprisoned because he spoke up about Jesus.

We also can be very intimidated. The world is preaching against what Jesus is about, about his hope, his lordship, his salvation, about following his ways.

We are tempted to give up our faith because of pain. It can be costly to love because Jesus first loved you.

But there is no greater thing that you can do than to prepare your family and your friends, your co-workers, to see Jesus in some way.

[24 : 13] There's no more loving act than moving people towards Jesus. Nothing better than turning their hearts from disobedience and towards Jesus in whom all true joy and blessing is found.

How will I do this? This is what we need to pray to God and ask him in our unique situations. How are we bringing people from their hearts of disobedience towards Jesus in whom all true blessing and joy is to be found?

So let's close by praying a prayer, the colic that we heard, that actually asked God to help us with it. And I'm going to read this prayer.

It's slightly different from what you have in your bulletin. I'm reading the original version of it because it talks about John. It talks about John.

Let's close our eyes and pray. Ask God's help that we might be those who are calling and bringing and encouraging those in our life towards Jesus.

[25 : 20] O Lord Jesus Christ, who at your first coming did send your messenger to prepare your way before you?

Grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready your way by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at your second coming to judge the world, we may be found an acceptable people in your sight who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end.

Amen.