

Preparing the Way

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[0 : 00] Well, it's a great privilege this morning to have been able to baptize my nephew. And I was trying to remember the last time that somebody had been the godfather, the baptizer, and the preacher, all in one service.

That might be a record. I don't know. Now, this is the third in a series of sermons on a text set out in the Book of Common Prayer for the four Sundays in Advent.

The collect, which I don't think we've prayed yet, mentions the messenger who prepares the way and the Messiah who comes to save and to judge.

And this collect captures what's going on in Matthew 11, 2 to 10. I'm wondering if you would turn it up onto page 10 in your Blue Pew Bible.

So that's page 10, and we're looking at Matthew 11. Now, there's a certain amount of excitement and anticipation this time of year.

[1 : 12] There's a lot of buildup, especially if you have kids. I took my boys last week to go to Ikea, and we bought a nearly dead \$15 Christmas tree, which I'm currently trying to resuscitate by putting it in water.

Not the whole tree, just the base. But I think it was cut just in time for last Christmas. And the condition of our lives right now seems to be one of increasing busyness in all of the preparations for Christmas.

Lots of extra commitments. And a personal symptom of this was the attraction that I had for the title of a book that I reviewed called No Time, Stress and the Crisis of Modern Life.

I'd like to read it. I just don't know if I can fit it in. So there's lots of activity, but there is a question that we should be asking, and that is, what or for whom should we be preparing?

And John the Baptist asks this question in Matthew 11. He's in prison, placed there by King Herod for insisting that Herod's marriage to his brother's wife was wrong.

[2 : 37] And John sends his followers to ask Jesus this question, and it's in verse 3. Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?

That's a great question. But it's a little bit surprising coming from John the Baptist. Because he knew who Jesus was. He was his first cousin.

He baptized Jesus. He saw the Holy Spirit descend on him like a dove. And he heard God say, This is my beloved son with whom I'm well pleased.

And Matthew tells us in verse 2 that John in prison had heard the deeds of Jesus. But I find this immensely encouraging, that after all of John's experiences with Jesus, he still felt able to ask this question.

He still wanted confirmation. It's encouraging for us, who may struggle with questions about Jesus 2,000 years later.

[3 : 46] And it's also encouraging that Jesus answered John's question. And he continues to do so today. Now, the particular question itself is very focused.

And so I want to look at it again with you. There's three things that stand out. Three things. The first one. He who is to come is a kind of a title.

It's a specific person that was expected. The second thing. There's an implication that this person will, in fact, come to a specific time and place in human history.

And third. Quite properly, the question is addressed. To Jesus. We should be ready to hear what he has to say about himself.

Now, this question comes at a good time in Matthew's Gospel because people were starting to wonder about him. There's been a rising tide of opposition to Jesus' ministry.

[4 : 54] And what we see in the four Gospels is a radically honest portrayal of how people failed to understand Jesus.

See, the Hebrew people were expecting something different. They were waiting for the day when the Lord would redeem or save Israel.

They desired this day. They thirsted for this day. A new era was coming when the sun would rise over a restored and magnificent kingdom.

God was going to come in the form of the Messiah, which is the Hebrew word for the anointed one. The one chosen and equipped by God. This Messiah would be a warrior king who would vindicate the nation of Israel on the world stage.

[5 : 50] A king who would make the nation great. And who would bring political salvation to a nation under Roman rule. But Jesus doesn't fit this profile.

He's born in a feeding trough, in a shed, not in a palace. He doesn't fast as his followers did. He breaks Sabbath laws.

He hangs out with social outcasts, with sinners. He doesn't conform himself to the prevailing view of the Messiah. So how does Jesus respond to John?

Let's look at verse 5. The blind receive, he says. Sorry, they receive their sight. The lame walk. Lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear.

The dead are raised up. The poor have good news preached to them. It's quite a list. Jesus could have just said, yes, I'm the one. But he chooses to appropriate two texts from Isaiah, the prophet.

[6 : 58] Each of which are loaded with significance. Now let me illustrate. When I proposed to the woman I wanted to marry, I used four words.

Four words. That for her, carried huge significance and meaning. They weren't throwaway words. And you'll be glad to know that Penny did accept the proposal. She's sitting right there. But that's what was going on here on a national scale with Israel.

Jesus quotes from Isaiah 35. And I'm going to read three verses of it for you from a different translation. And this is God speaking through the prophet to Israel.

Say to those who are afraid, be strong and do not fear. For your God is coming to destroy your enemies. He is coming to save you.

[7 : 57] And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf. The lame will leap like deer. And those who cannot speak will shout and sing.

Springs will gush forth in the wilderness and streams will water the desert. See, the healing actions of Jesus are a sign that the new kingdom has come.

That God himself is coming. In the context of Isaiah, they are part of a vital picture of the new life that God promises to those he's come to save.

Not just in Israel, but in all of heaven and earth. Nothing will be outside God's reign as rightful king. In fact, the final verse of Isaiah 35 ends with this sentence of promise. For those the Lord ransoms. Sorrow and mourning will disappear and they will be overcome with joy and gladness.

[9 : 07] It's a picture of heaven. It's a picture of heaven. It's a picture of heaven. This verse is actually the verse that's quoted in Revelation 21 in the description that John has given about what heaven is like.

So this is the good news that Jesus is anointed or commissioned in Isaiah 61 to preach to the poor. Referring to those who are aware of their spiritual poverty and need for a savior.

So that's how Jesus answers John the Baptist. By locating his reply in these texts from Isaiah, he tells John the Baptist that there's no need to look for another.

He is the one who was supposed to come. And he has brought the promised kingdom of God. Now I'll come back to verse 6 in a minute, but I want to look at what Jesus says about his messenger.

Having answered John's question about the Messiah, Jesus speaks about John himself. Now you may remember earlier in Matthew, John the Baptist comes on scene with a specific purpose.

[10 : 23] which is to bring people's expectations in line with the reality to come. Let me put that a different way. The messenger's purpose is to compel people to receive the savior by revealing their sin to them and their need for a savior.

And in this sense, John the Baptist is a classic prophet. He's out in the wilderness on the margins of society, a voice saying things that must be said, which are both hope for and judgment on the nation.

Look at verse 7. Jesus speaks to the crowds concerning John. What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind?

And Jesus' point here is that John the Baptist isn't compliant to the culture, like a reed waving in the wind, like the corrupt priests who said only what the people wanted to hear.

In verse 8, Jesus comments on him and says that John the Baptist isn't a man of this world either. He's not living for comfort, luxury, status, and prestige, like Herod, for example.

[11:45] In verse 9, Jesus says, Why then did you go out to see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

You see, Jesus is saying that John the Baptist isn't just a prophet. He's the prophet. In a sense, John the Baptist is the final voice of the Old Testament.

Prophecy about the coming Messiah ends with John the Baptist. This is the moment that the Israelites had been waiting for, the advent, the coming of the kingdom of God.

John the Baptist is the only one who saw the Messiah, the one who had the special role of anointing the Messiah and preparing the way for him. So how does John prepare the people?

If you would turn left, that's what David Short says, if you turn back about eight pages to page two, I'm going to read just a couple of verses here from Matthew chapter 3.

[12:55] And again, the question is, how does John the Baptist prepare Israel? I'm reading from chapter 3, verse 1. In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Luke, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

And I'm skipping down to verse 11 now. I baptize you with water for repentance. Repentance, that's what John the Baptist says. But he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I'm not worthy to carry.

So this is the messenger who points to and prepares the way for the Messiah. Their preparation is repentance.

Repentance. Now here's what I mean by repentance. Repentance means to do, it means to do a U-turn. To turn our backs on the radical self-interest that defines our culture.

[14:05] And to face God in humility. I saw an ad on TV the other day. It's an ad for Dish TV. And it's a guy sitting in a lounge chair with a remote control.

And the voice comes on and says, be the master of your television universe. Now if you take out the word television, you have understood the biblical shape of sin.

Our natural desire is to be master of our own universe. To be in control. But the message John the Baptist is bringing to Israel at the time of Jesus is that we are not God.

That we need to turn to God and obey God. Now, if you turn back to Matthew chapter 11, we'll look at the last verse of our text, verse 10.

And this is kind of the summary statement that Jesus makes about John. He quotes from Malachi. Now I'm going to paraphrase it. Let me just set it up for you. This verse is God speaking to Jesus.

[15:18] And God says, Behold, I send my messenger John before you, who shall prepare your way before you. So Jesus is affirming John, but he's also affirming himself, because in Malachi, the you is God himself, coming to save those who return to him, and to judge those who continue to rebel.

I'll say this differently. Finally, Jesus says that he is God, come to earth as Savior and judge. This is quite an amazing claim.

Jesus isn't neutral and safe. If Jesus Christ is only a famous infant that we sing about this time of year, then he's irrelevant.

He's inadequate for the gravity of our needs, of our sin. But if Jesus Christ is God, then repentance becomes our only adequate response.

Jesus Christ doesn't come to save the nation of Israel as a political entity, but he comes to save people from the consequences of their sin, and to bring us into a restored relationship with the God who created us.

[16:44] Now let me end with verse 6. We'll skip back up. Jesus makes this very interesting statement. Blessed is he who takes no offense at me.

Blessed are they who take no offense. This passage began with a question, and I want to end it with a question. In effect, if I turn what Jesus said around in a question form, Jesus is saying, he's

saying to John, I've answered your question.

I've told you that I'm the one. Now the question to us is, what are we going to do about it? What are you going to do about me? This is the central question of the Christian faith.

What do we do about Jesus? Now I find it interesting that in the Gospels, people found it quite easy to be offended by Jesus.

Why were they offended? Well, Jesus was calling people to repentance, but they thought they were fine. He came to release them from sin that they didn't think they had.

[17 : 55] That would be offensive. I understand that. It's also interesting to know what happens.

How do people respond to Jesus? The narrative surrounding our text this morning is full of rejection, both for the prophets and for Jesus himself.

It's an incredible picture of human sin, actually, but it's also a picture of what God does with human sin. John the Baptist very soon is going to have his head cut off.

Jesus will end up going to the cross, and that's how people respond. The ones who had offended God were offended by God coming back to them, offering salvation.

And they killed the messenger, and they killed the Messiah. But the amazing thing, and this is the thing I want to leave us with, is that through this rejection, God offers salvation to those who have rejected him.

Out of the rejection and death of Christ, God makes it possible for us to have life forever with him. That's the good news.

[19 : 15] Amen.