

You probably still have a lot to do yet to get ready for Christmas. The decorations may not all be up yet. There are still gifts which need to be purchased. The holiday cookies and treats probably are not all made yet. Then there are also such things as Christmas cards to be sent. For all of these reasons, we are probably glad that Christmas is still a couple of weeks away. But this morning, as we light the second of our Advent candles, the Bethlehem candle, we remember that God has kept the promises of a Savior when Jesus was born in Bethlehem so long ago. But even after He was born, there was still work which needed to be done to prepare the people to receive and welcome Him as the promised Savior. And that work fell to John the Baptist. He was the one about whom Isaiah had prophesied when he said, **PREPARE THE WAY FOR THE LORD.** 1) John the Baptist came to prepare the way for Jesus by preaching repentance. In doing so, 2) John pointed the eyes of the people to the One Who would come after him.

We are aware of the facts that surround John's birth. John was set apart for the special purpose of preparing the people for the coming of Jesus even before he was born. John's whole life style showed everyone that there was something special about him. First of all, one would normally expect a prophet to go where there were many people. But John did not go to the big cities — he stayed in a desert region, and the people had to travel to come to see him. Add to this the fact that his appearance was not of one who was finely dressed — **“John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.”** (6) John gave the impression of someone who led an austere life. And that was exactly what he wanted.

Because that coincided beautifully with the message which he proclaimed to all who came out to see him. He was able to get the attention of everyone by doing this. **“The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.”** (5) They had heard about this prophet who lived by the Jordan River, and they went out to investigate for themselves, out of curiosity, if for no other reason. When they got out there, they listened to the message which John proclaimed to them. **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”** John preached the repentance of sins as the only way to be prepared to receive the Messiah Who would soon be revealed. Repentance means to recognize that you have fallen into sin and need someone to save you. Through the stern preaching of the law, John was able to get the people to recognize their sinfulness and the need for the Savior Who was to come.

After hearing this message, it did produce an effect upon their hearts: **“Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.”** (5) His message struck their hearts as they realized that they were sinners who needed forgiveness before they would be able to receive the promised Savior. So they were ready to confess their sins, and receive his baptism to wash away all of their sins.

As we prepare our own hearts during this season of Advent, the same message of John is fitting and proper for us to hear as well. We too need to recognize the need for the washing away of all of our sins. We recognize that we daily sin much, even as we confessed our sins earlier in this worship service. Only after having our sins washed away are we ready to welcome and receive the Lord into our hearts. We have purple candles in our advent wreath to remind ourselves that advent is a time to prepare our hearts to receive our Savior. Repentance is the only way that we will be ready to confess our own sinfulness and the need which we have for a Savior — the very Savior Whom God has sent into this world, born as a baby in Bethlehem. John's message is just as important for us today as it was to the people of his day in getting us to prepare our hearts properly to welcome the newborn King. Let us confess our sins and seek the forgiveness of them all in the love and sacrifice which He came into this world to make on our behalf.

As we make preparations for this season in which we welcome the newborn Savior again, let us learn another lesson from John. John knew that he had the mission of preparing the people to receive Jesus. They were not to keep looking to John, for he would not be able to give them what they really needed. So he pointed the eyes of everyone to the One Who would come after him. **“After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.”** (7) John was saying that there was no comparison between what he was doing in preparing the way with what

Jesus would do Who was coming after him. Jesus was much more powerful because the One born in that stable in Bethlehem was none other than the Almighty Creator of the universe. He had shown His love for fallen mankind by coming to this earth for the sole purpose of gaining eternal salvation for all mankind. This coming Savior was so great that John stated he was not even worthy to untie His shoes.

When John said, “**I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit,**” (8) John was not saying that his baptism was not beneficial. He was not even saying that Jesus’ baptism was better, for both proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But Jesus was able to send the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. This was something which John was not able to do because John was not true God as Jesus was. That is why John recognized that he was not to gather the people to himself, but to keep their eyes pointed on Jesus Who had come as the promised Savior. He was the real reason why His baptism was powerful and effective, for Jesus came to wash away the sins of the whole world.

So to this day, following Jesus’ command, we still baptize to wash away sins and to create and strengthen faith in the heart. And to this day, as we make preparations during the season of Advent, we recognize that those preparations are not the important thing. Christmas is not about the decorations, the cookies, the cards, the gifts, or the parties. Whether we have any of those things or not, we will still be able to have Christmas, for the important thing about the season is not all of this outward preparations and celebrations, but it is the fact that Jesus has come. All of the rest is simply to prepare our hearts for this Savior to come and live in our hearts forever. May that be what we use this season of Advent for, even as John the Baptist prepared the hearts of the people for the coming of the Savior, so let us use this season to prepare our heart for His coming and living there forever.