

Dec. 9: 2nd Sunday in Advent, Marimba player
Message: John the Baptist: Declare! #2: Repent!

Scripture: Matt. 3:1-3

Text: Isaiah 40:3 “A voice is crying out: Clear the LORD's way in the desert! Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God!”

Memory Verse: Matthew 3:2 “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!”

Blurb: Decorating our homes for Christmas usually includes clearing away what normally sits on our furniture and walls to make room for Christmas decorations. It also includes a deeper cleaning as furniture is moved and corners are tidied. John the Baptist, who calls God's people to prepare for the coming of the Savior, called us clean up our lives. This Sunday we'll hear the voice of preparation call out: Repent!

Opening Song: *He Reigns* -Sanctify

Welcome: -Pastor David

Memory Verse:

“Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” Matthew 3:2

Worship Music Set: - Sanctify

People Look East

On This Day

Is He Worthy?

Worship Prayer - Andrew

Offering: Marimba instrumental

Serve Moment: Christmas Camp; sign-up in the lobby

Message: John the Baptist: Declare! #2: Repent!

PP#1: John the Baptist: Declare!

Repent!

Isaiah 40:3 “A voice is crying out: Clear the LORD's way in the desert! Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God!”

As we get ready for Christmas this year, we're listening to John the Baptist. He message he declares we need to hear. Today we hear him declare: “Repent!” Isaiah 40, verse 3 says, “A voice is crying out: Clear the LORD's way in the desert! Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God!”

PP#2: *Image of a basement storage with Christmas decorations.*

The parsonage where we live has a storm shelter accessed down through the garage but that sits below the bathroom and kitchen. The furnace and water heater are there, along with the electrical and piping. But there is also coveted room for that most precious of all home spaces: storage! Down there are our suitcases, left over paint cans, off-season clothes, and the growing pile for the next church rummage sale. But along the one side there are usually found five large boxes all labeled “Christmas.” Next to them are the artificial Christmas tree, three wreaths, and plastic, light-up figures of Santa Clause, snowmen, lit candy canes, and penguins, my personal favorite. All this takes up a significant portion of our basement storage.

Now, I say “usually found there” because this time of year, all that stuff gets transferred upstairs in order to get ready for Christmas. And that’s a lot of work, isn’t it? Not only decorations, but Christmas parties, annual letters, baking, cooking, shopping, gift-buying, travel and family gatherings.

It’s a lot of work getting ready for Christmas.

PP#3: *Image of a living room with a huge tree and all the furniture squished in around it.*

In our living room, you understand, we normally don’t have a seven-foot tree. Most of the year we have chairs, tables, a sofa, a hutch, a piano. But getting ready for Christmas means redecorating the whole room. The tree comes up from downstairs, and two tables and a chair go downstairs. And although we vacuum and dust throughout the year, when we move the furniture, we’re surprised just how much stuff accumulates out of normal sight behind and under the stuff that’s usually there. You can tell the shape of the support structure underneath the furniture by the outline of dust left on the carpet. And I just don’t know where all those cob webs come from...we never see a spider!

So, once again this year, after Nathan hauled up all the boxes and Rebekah the decorations from downstairs, and we prepared to decorate for Christmas, it came time for that dreaded, but crucial part of decorating. It started out like this. I said, “Nathan, go get the vacuum.” Noooooooo! “Rebekah, get the duster.” And their response of groans and sighs and acting like they just received mortal wounds right to the heart threatened to derail all of Christmas.

“Do we have to?” “Can’t we skip it all this year?” “Can’t we just have the presents without the tree to put them under? You could just put them on the dining room table Christmas morning.” Because Christmas, you see, distilled to it’s most basic form, is about getting presents!

It’s just so much work getting ready for Christmas.

PP#4: Declare: Repent!

1. You can’t just add a little Christmas to your life.

Hmmm. Perhaps, this year, we can use this as a lesson to help us turn our focus onto what Christmas really is about, and maybe even help us prepare for Christmas in the most meaningful and lasting of ways.

God knew we would need this help. He knew our temptation is simply to leave everything the way is, and just try to add a little blessing. He knew our tendency is to stay comfortable, familiar, leave our lives basically alone, and yet expect a new future. Even our response to Christmas is to try to add some cheer without the deep change it brings.

We are trapped, you know, in a life of emptiness, of shallow existence, stuck in cold relationships, hardened regrets, uncompromising, “it’s just the way it is.” And we yearn for a different reality.

God answered that yearning. He promised something different. He promised light shining into our darkness, hope breaking into our stuckness, life in the midst of death. Hundreds of years before the first Christmas, God had His prophets declare, “Comfort, comfort my people, says God,” (Isaiah 40:1), “Up from the dead stump grows a new shoot” (Isaiah 11:1), “The people walking in darkness see a great light” (Isaiah 9:2), “Joy will break out to all peoples (Isaiah 9:3), “The LORD gives strength to His people; the LORD blesses His people with peace” (Psalm 29:11).

God promised to send a Messiah, a Savior, to change our lives. It is the arrival of this Savior that we celebrate at Christmas. But, just like my living room cannot receive the Christmas tree and boxes of decorations, for it has no room, no readiness, so too we cannot receive this Savior unless we clean out and make room.

PP#5: *The image of John the Baptist from Cassi, with the words John the Baptist*

God knew we need help to make room, and prepare to receive this most wondrous of all His blessings. So He sent someone to announce the Savior’s coming, to declaring we need to make ready. This special announcer, this harbinger, we call John the Baptist.

John had a very special role during that first Christmas, and we’ll see that in the coming weeks. But we see his role continue after Christmas. As Jesus prepared to come out and reveal that He was the Savior sent by God, John started telling the world to get ready.

Turn to Matthew 3.

PP#6: Matthew 3:1-3 (CEB)

1 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, 2 “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!”

3 John was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said: The voice of one shouting in the wilderness, “Prepare the way for the Lord; make His paths straight.”

Verse 1, “In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, ‘[Repent!] Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!’”

“John was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said: The voice of one shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord; make His paths straight.’”

Repent! The One that God is sending to change everything—who will answer your yearning—is on His way. He’ll be here soon. Get ready.

How do are we to get ready? The word John used was, “Repent!” Now, when we think of repent, we think of saying sorry for all that you’ve done wrong. But that’s not really what it means...although maybe it is part of it. The word John used means “change,” like it’s translated here in this version, the CEV: “change your hearts and lives!”

John, this passage says, is the announcer, the harbinger promised by the prophets, who would come ahead and call people to make ready for the Savior. He’s out in the wilderness. He calls the people away from the familiar, the routine, and out into the wilderness, into the desert. That’s where he tells them to change their lives. Those that desire to see the coming Savior, John baptizes, as a sign of cleansing, washing away sin. He is called John the Baptizer.

PP#7: Declare: Repent!

1. You can’t just add a little Christmas to your life.
2. Change your hearts and lives.

This year, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, we hear John calling to us: repent! Change your hearts and lives! Come away from the familiar, the routine. Come into the desert: de-clutter and reduce. Take away what normally fills our days. Remove what usually furnishes our lives. Create space and time and an capacity to receive God's intention for you.

When we try to leave everything just as it is in our lives, and just try to add a little blessing, we miss what God is trying to do. When we try to add a celebration of Christmas to our lives, without cleaning out first, we miss what we really need. We don't have the ability to receive what Christmas really is. We don't have capacity for the change that its new life requires. We can't just add a little Christmas.

PP#8: Declare: Repent!

1. You can't just add a little Christmas to your life.
2. Change your hearts and lives.
3. Make room to receive Jesus.

John says, "Clear a way for the Lord to come! Out in the wilderness make a straight...level...direct route for God to come." Today we might phrase it, "open your hearts to receive God's Messiah. Become receptive.

Preparing for Christmas requires we repent. It requires that we clean out, strip down, reduce, go into the desert. We must remove those normal things that we fill our lives with but that don't let us receive God fully. To have our arms ready to hold the baby Jesus, we must put down whatever we are carrying first.

What do you need to put down? What do you need to remove? What do you need to take away? Preparing for Christmas means changing our heart and lives.

PP#9: *Image of the angel appearing to Mary.*

The angel visited Mary and asked her to be the mother of the Messiah. This would completely change her life. It would also come at a great sacrifice to her. Would she be willing to give up so much? But the blessing would blow her away. She said, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let this happen to me as you say!" (Luke 1:38)

When the angel appeared to Joseph, asking if he would give up the life he expected and take Mary as his wife, he shredded his divorce papers and gave her a ring.

When the magi in the east saw the star, they stopped what they were doing, changed everything and went on a perhaps two year trip. When the angels appeared to the shepherds, they left the sheep, their fields, broke social norms, and went to go worship the newborn Savior.

PP#10: Philippians 2:6-8 [Perhaps in the form of a picture?]

Christ Jesus, though He was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Jesus, who came to be our Savior, gave up His position in glory, gave up His honor, His might, His divine radiance, emptied Himself the Bible says, and became one of us.

We cannot just add a little Christmas. We cannot just add a little Jesus. We won't receive the transformation we yearn for. We will stay stuck in our mess. We'll have a jolly holiday, and everything will go back to exactly the same as it was.

So, if you want the full blessing of Christmas...if you want a different future...if you want all the Jesus came to give, then you must begin by cleaning out and making room.

PP#11: Declare: Repent!

1. You can't just add a little Christmas to your life.
2. Change your hearts and lives.
3. Make room to receive Jesus.
4. Pray a simple, 2-word prayer.

In the next two weeks, as you prepare to celebrate Christmas, I invite you to make this a time of holy preparation. As you shift furniture around and remove normal furnishings, stop and pray. Ask God to sift through your heart and identify what needs to go. When you get out the vacuum, or clear events on your calendar, let that remind you to spend some time spiritually cleaning, too. As you lay out Christmas decorations and wipe down dirty surfaces, stop and ask God to wipe you clean from the sin that keeps you away from His intention for you. Ask God to make you receptive, to open your heart, to awaken in you a deeper desire and longing for more of Jesus.

Getting ready for Christmas is a lot of work! It means downsizing and going off into the wilderness. It means hearing John the Baptist's call to change your heart and life. It means making room. But, it is only when you listen to that call, that you can experience the full blessing that God intends for you this Christmas.

I'm going to give you a prayer to pray each day for the next two weeks. It's an extremely simple and easy prayer. But I think you'll find it powerful.

Turn in your hymnals to page 34.

The prayer is just two simple words. But these words are a response to some heavy and meaningful questions...Christmas questions.

You'll see on page 34 that this is part of the formal liturgy of baptism.

Imagine yourself face-to-face with John the Baptist. He's calling you to come out and prepare for the coming of the Lord. And you come for baptism.

He turns to you and asks, "Do you make straight a path in the desert for the coming of God into your heart? Do you make ready for the coming Messiah?"

Your answer is your simple prayer, two little words, spoken from the bottom of your heart:
I do!

We're going to use the baptism questions printed here. You see that they are prayers of repentance and profession of faith.

PP#12: "On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?"

I do!

"Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?"

I do!

We'll start our daily prayers here today. I'll read the question, and you respond with your prayer vow, your two simple words. Ready? Let's pray.

“On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?”

I do!

“Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?”

I do!

PP#13: “Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve Him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?”

I do!

“Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve Him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?”

I do!

Amen!

Church, every day for the next two weeks, pray this simple prayer. As you move your furnishings around, stop and pray “I do.”

PP#14: Declare: Repent!

1. You can't just add a little Christmas to your life.
2. Change your hearts and lives.
3. Make room to receive Jesus.
4. Pray a simple, 2-word prayer.
5. Preparing for Christmas is hard work!

As you clean your homes, dust and vacuum, stop and pray, “I do.”

As you change your schedules and your routines, and as you travel in your vehicles, stop and pray, “I do.”

As you put out your nativities, hang them on your trees, or see it in a picture, take a closer look at the baby Jesus, open your heart just a bit more, and say, “I do.”

It's a lot of work getting ready for Christmas. It's something we have to do every day until it comes!

Amen.

Closing Song: *Reckless Love* - Sanctify

Memory Verse:

“Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” Matthew 3:2

Announcements: -Pastor David

Benediction: -Pastor David