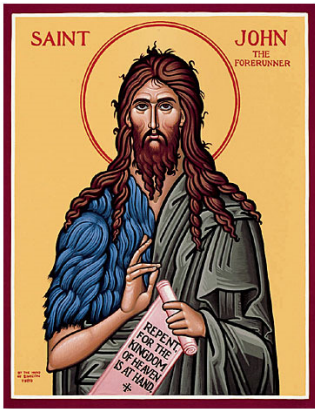


WHY DO I NEED TO PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS?

Pastor Colin Rieke ~ December 6, 2015



¹The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ²It is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”— ³“a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ ” ⁴And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:1-8)

Dear fellow pilgrims on our Advent journey,

Around the Rieke household, it’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas. We have icicle lights adorning our roofline. The Christmas decorations have been hung, the Christmas tree is lit and decorated and there are even presents under the tree. This is thanks in large part to my wife who wanted to get as much stuff done before the baby gets here as possible. She gave me and our two girls different tasks to get done around the house to help out. This is some of the preparations that we make around the Rieke household in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

Now, I wouldn’t dare do this, because I love my wife, but what if I would have said “no” to her? What if I would have made my pregnant wife do all the decorating? I can’t know for sure, but she may have had some choice words to say. Perhaps she would have said you better shape up or ship out – meaning you better help out, or get your butt outa here. That’s usually the thought behind that phrase: shape up or ship out. A boss might say it to an underperforming employee, a coach might say it to a disruptive player, a wife might say it to her underachieving husband.

Now, I can’t know for sure, but I have never heard of anyone saying: shape up and ship out. Usually the conjunctive is “or.” While that may not be a common phrase, that is really the summary of what John the Baptist preached. He preached “shape up and ship out.” This Advent season, as we continue looking at the backstory to Jesus’ birth and the preparations God made for Jesus’ coming, we see how John played a vital role in paving the way for the Savior. His God-given mission was to prepare people for the Messiah. The unspoken reason for his mission is that the Jewish people needed preparing. It is the same unspoken reason why John’s message applies to us today. It answers the question of WHY DO I NEED TO PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS? John’s answer, so you can:

1. Shape up and be ready to
2. Ship out

So what were the times like that John the Baptist preached? Interestingly, they were not too dissimilar to the days we live in today. The Roman Empire had seemingly reached its climax, its emperor Augustus, out of necessity became more focused on keeping the empire together rather than expanding it. Two dominant ideas which permeated the Roman Empire, which included the land of Israel, were pride and pleasure – pride in the glory of Rome or in the glory of self, pleasure which gratified every human sensuality. Both of these ideas turned men and women inward, looking to self; both of these ideas ultimately led to atheism and despair. Philosophy and religion had nothing to offer, society could not reform itself. The Roman Empire, in the minds of the noblest thinkers, had begun its descent from the peak of the mountain.

It was into such a world as this that John the Baptist came. Last Sunday, we heard the announcement of John's birth to his father Zechariah in the temple. Now, we fast-forward about 30 years after that announcement. It's a period of 30 years which the Bible doesn't talk much about. But now that the time had fully come, God once again continues to prepare his people for the Messiah.

We just heard the very first words from the gospel of Mark – first chapter, first verse. **“The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”** Mark begins by telling us about John the Baptist, how he was foretold by the great prophet from the Old Testament Isaiah, **“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” – “a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”** This was the reason John came baptizing in the desert region, preaching a baptism of repentance.

Mark records that many in the surrounding areas came out to see this prophet in the desert. Some would have come just out of curiosity, others would have come because he spoke about the promised Savior for Israel, he gave a solution to a problem many thought hopeless. But nothing could've prepared them for the message that John brought. Unlike a campaigning politician, John did not just spout off empty rhetoric. This was a true message of hope. But the preparations John called for were different than what some were willing to make.

You see, the common idea of a Messiah at this time was one who would come to take away Israel's enemies and make Israel, not Rome, the world power of the day. Therefore, they expected the preparations to be more on a physical level – get your weapons ready, setup your defenses, here's the battle plan. But this was not what John had in mind at all. When John talked about making a straight path for the Savior he meant having people shape up on a spiritual level. In other words, he called for repentance from the people. This repentance was not just a saying “sorry,” but involved a complete change of heart.

“WHY DO I NEED TO PREPARE FOR THE MESSIAH by repenting?” may have been a thought that ran through many people's minds. They were the Jews, the chosen people of God. They followed God's laws, maybe not perfectly, but trying should count for something. That's the instinctive thought that runs through each and every person's mind. It's the idea that “good enough” is good enough. But John squashed that idea that “good enough” is good enough. Good enough is never good enough for God. John pointed out the pagan influences they allowed into their worship life, he pointed out the

impure motives and selfish thoughts. He reminded them of that Law of Moses which stated, “**Be holy as I am holy.**” If you are not holy, YOU NEED TO PREPARE FOR THE MESSIAH by repenting, or shaping up spiritually.

The question comes up in our day and age too, doesn't it? WHY DO I NEED TO PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS? Maybe not in those exact words, but it is reflected in similar sounding statements – why do I need to come to church? Why do I need to read my Bible if I know what the message is anyway? I will answer that question with another question. Did you sin this last week? Between the time you came to church last until today, did you sin? Did you have a selfish thought? Did you have a worrisome thought? Did you have an angry outburst? Did you justify in your mind what you did was right? This only reveals how much WE NEED TO PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS. Because it reveals how crooked our paths have become. It reveals our need to turn from our wicked self-loving ways, it shows our need for a Savior. And that's the message that John preached.

Unfortunately, many people today don't see a need to prepare their minds and hearts for a Savior, a Savior who they need more than they could possibly realize. This last week, there was another mass shooting in San Bernardino, CA. A few days later, *The Daily News* printed a controversial cover declaring “God isn't fixing this!” Now, perhaps the point was to do something, instead of being lazy and using God as a “catch-all.” But I think that headline betrays all too often how the world thinks, and how we can think at times too. Whenever a problem crops up in the world, an instinctive reaction is to blame God, instead of looking to what God did do.

I have been guilty of this. There have been all too many times in my life when I have forgotten what God did do. When I have made excuses for my behavior. When I have wondered and worried why certain things have happened. When I have timidly shied away from confessing the truth that I know in the Bible. God did do something to fix the problems in the world. He sent his only Son to die for our sins and win salvation for all those who believe. This fixes *the problem* we face every day of our lives. This is WHY I NEED TO PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS.

I NEED TO PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS because I need to shape up my life spiritually. This doesn't mean I need to start acting like a better person, or that I need to show up at church more. It means I need to look at my life, at my heart and see my own sins – my sins of worry, my sins of doubt, my sins of anger, my sins of pride. I need to confess those sins and turn from them. I need to wash them away in the cleansing waters of baptism, and find forgiveness in the Savior whom God's messengers preach. I find that forgiveness as I prepare my heart for his coming as a baby in a manger, but as I also prepare my heart for his coming in the clouds on the last day.

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For many people who saw and heard John the Baptist preach, they were amazed. Some even wondered if he was the promised Messiah. John made it very clear that he was not. In fact he said, **“After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”**

John was not the long promised Messiah, he was only the messenger pointing to the Messiah. And as great as John was, he was nothing in comparison to who Christ is. Some have taken John's

comparison of baptisms to mean that John's baptism didn't forgive sin, while Jesus' baptism does forgive sin. But Mark says only verses before that forgiveness was conveyed through John's baptism as well. What John was saying is that Jesus is the powerful one who gives the Holy Spirit which comes through baptism as a means through which God works faith.

We know Jesus demonstrated this power through the many miracles shown in the gospels. Jesus demonstrated his power by conquering even death itself coming back from the grave as a proof of who he is. He did this not only to demonstrate his power over death, but he did it also to show what his followers can expect to do at the end of their lives also. Physical death will not be the end. Which is the second reason WHY I NEED TO PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS, so that I can be ready to ship out.

The shipping out I'm talking about is the promise God has given to take those who believe in his Son to be with him in heaven. This is the only promise in the Bible which he has not fulfilled...yet. If we didn't prepare our hearts and minds for this coming, we would not be ready for it. Instead Jesus, through his messengers tells us to **“not be like the others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled.”**

When we are alert and self-controlled, that means we are looking with one eye heavenward, but with the other fixed firmly here on earth. It means we realize the urgency because we don't know when the end will come. It means we live every day as if it were our last. It means we can take every opportunity we are presented with to share the gospel message. We have an awesome opportunity for you to do that this in the weeks leading up to Christmas. We have wrapped DVDs which tell the Christmas story, use those to invite your unchurched family, friends and neighbors to our Christmas services.

Now, fortunately for you, I'm not able to tell you to shape up or ship out if you don't take one of those DVDs and invite a friend. But I will remind you of John the Baptist's message, which was also the message of Isaiah, which is also the message of Christian preachers today – make straight your path, repent of your sin, and lean upon a Savior who has done it all. And so WHY DO I NEED TO PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS – so that you can shape up and be ready to ship out. Amen.