

**Must Be Important!**  
**December 5, 2021**

Good morning, Church! This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! Welcome to this, the second Sunday of Advent. This is also the first Sunday of December, which means communion. Not exactly the way we would like, but the best we can do under the present circumstances. You should have received one of these as you came in. If you did not, raise your hand and ushers will make sure that you get one of these pre-packaged communions. If you are joining us from home, please get your elements ready, so that we might bless them all together. Remember that they don't have to be bread and juice. They can be other elements that are appropriate for you.

I want to read a passage of scripture today taken from the book of Luke, beginning with chapter three, verse one.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar--when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene--during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough way smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation.'"

May God bless the reading of the Word.

What are the memories that mark this season for you? What are those moments that stand out? For some of us those memories are altogether joyous, and for others it's a mixed bag, and for others a struggle. But there are moments that mark this season. When I was a kid, when my mother was still alive, we put up the same artificial Christmas tree every year. We called it Mr. Silver Tree. It was about this tall. Guess what color it was? We put it up in Long Beach, California; San Diego, California; Jacksonville, Florida; Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; and Quitman, Mississippi. Every year we decorated it with green and red plain ornaments and silver tinsel. Now, why you would put silver tinsel on a silver tree I have no idea, but that was our tradition. My mother died when I was 10. She died toward the end of October and my dad remarried the first of January that next year. And in between is Christmas. I have no memory, no memory of what happened between October and January. That's kind of one of those things that mark the season for me. I think about that. And, as a pastor, I have all those Christmas Eves that are just glorious and awesome. But also, I have those other times when we lost saints on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and then a child that died of SIDS on Christmas Day. So, those things mark some of my memories. I remember one time being in the Boise valley and making my way to the mall. That, in and of itself for me, is a miracle. I had managed to go nine years in the Boise valley without ever making it to the mall. But I made it to the mall and it was during the Christmas time and I was on the top floor and I was coming down and a lady got on right behind me, a young lady. She had all the packages she could possibly stuff under one arm. She had one child very firmly gripped in the other hand, and that child was holding on to another child and both

of them were whimpering. And she looked right at me and she said, "I will be so glad when Christmas is over!" I probably did in my heart what you just did (laugh), but after reflecting on that I said, "How sad that this beautiful young lady with two beautiful kids is feeling this way during this season." You hold on to those memories for just a little bit. We'll be back in a few minutes.

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. Today and next Sunday we'll be talking about John the Baptist. John the Baptist prepared the way for the coming of Messiah, prepared the way for Jesus Christ. And it is such an important event that Luke marks it with no less than six different dates. One is an international date of Tiberius Caesar. The others are local government dates in the tetrarchs of the area, and two of them are religious dates of the high priest. Because this date, this beginning, marked the beginning of a new era. It was the close of the old era and the start of a new era. John the Baptist was preparing the way for nothing less than a new era to begin.

Today we want to look at the person of John, his message, and how we might follow in his footsteps in preparing the way for others to receive the message of Jesus. John is an interesting character. John is a relative of Jesus. John's mother, Elizabeth, was a relative of Jesus' mother, Mary. John's dad was a priest and, while serving in the temple, an angel of the Lord appears to him and says, "Zechariah, you're going to be a daddy!" He went, "Hah! Do you know how old I am? Do you know how old my wife is?" And the angel says, "Dude, you're talking to Gabriel. I go in and out in the presence of God and just because you doubted me, you're not gonna talk until the baby is born. Hah!" And he didn't talk until John was born and then he had a lot to say. John's parents took a Nazirite vow on his behalf, which meant that a razor was never to touch his beard or his hair. Now at this time, when he begins his ministry, he's over 30 years of age. Can you imagine what he looked like after 30 years of not cutting his hair or shaving? He would be what we call it in the South a woolly booger. He lived in the desert. He lived off of the land. He ate what the land provided, which was locusts and wild honey. To put it in our vernacular, that is grasshoppers and wild honey. The honey sounds just fine except for the disgusting habit of Palestinian honeybees. They had the habit of building their nest inside the dead, desiccated carcasses of animals. That's what John ate. He wore a camel skin for his clothing. This is not a camel-hair jacket, but a camel skin that was tied around his waist with leather. And he preached a message of baptism for the repentance of sin.

There are two words there that we need to understand in order to understand John's message, and that is baptism and repentance. The word baptism in Greek is baptizo. We generally translate that as "immerse," but the best word to translate baptizo is "overwhelm". Yes, John baptized with water. Yes, it was an immersion baptism, but the meaning was much more than immersion in water. That was symbolic. Immersion means to overwhelm. It means to completely surround. If a ship sinks, it is baptizo. If a person is swallowed by quicksand, it is baptizo. If they are engulfed in a storm, it is baptizo. If they are engulfed in a culture, completely surrounded and immersed in a culture, it is baptizo. Baptism was nothing new to the Jewish people. They had practiced it for centuries, but there's a catch. When a non-Jewish person wanted to join the Jewish faith, they went through an intensive training that for males involved circumcision. At the end of that training, they were baptized. It symbolized a washing

away of the old person and a complete immersion in the Jewish culture for the new convert. It was not just the washing away of sin. It was the immersion into the Jewish culture. They believed that non-Jewish people who joined the Jewish faith needed to be baptized. They did not believe they needed to be baptized. John came preaching a baptism for everyone. Next week, you're going to hear John the Baptist say, "Don't tell me, don't tell me that you have Abraham as your father, because God can make these rocks children of Abraham. You need to be baptized, each and every one of you. Repent of your sins and get your heart right to receive the message God has for you."

Baptism is symbolic of repentance. John said, "Everyone must repent and be baptized." That word repent is an interesting word as well. Very often when we think of repentance, we think of saying, "I'm sorry." It may begin there, but that is not repentance. Y'all hear me? Saying "I'm sorry" is not repentance. Repentance in Greek is actually a military command. It takes three English commands to equal one Greek command. It is "Halt. About face. Forward march. Halt. About face. Forward march." That is what repentance means. Saying "I'm sorry" may be the beginning of repentance but it's not the ending of repentance. When I was in the South, we had a lot of revival meetings. One of the customs of southern revivals is sometimes people get up and confess their sins in front of the whole church. I can remember as a child going home and thinking to myself, "Now, I wouldn't have said that out loud." There's a bad story about a lady who got up in a in a revival meeting and she said, "God, please forgive me and my family of the load of hay we stole last night. And while you're at it, forgive us for the one we're going to get tonight, too." That is not repentance. Now, take our same lady. Let me demonstrate what repentance is. It would be repentance if she said, "God, forgive me and my family for the load of hay we stole last night. We will return it tonight and we will pay the farmer for that which we have already used and any reparation we need to, and we promise never to do this again." That is repentance. The way I teach repentance to children is this: repentance is to stop doing the wrong thing and turn around and do the right thing. And the way I do it with the kids is, I get them to say it with me. "Children, you stop doing the wrong thing, start doing the right thing. Stop doing the wrong thing, start doing the right thing." See, I told you, you can teach old dogs new tricks! That is repentance. John came preaching a baptism of repentance to help people prepare their hearts to hear the message of Jesus, to hear the good news, to hear that God is breaking into human existence and bringing salvation, not through law but through grace. Preparing the way, getting people ready to hear the message, helping them understand that they did not know it all and they needed to repent of their sins so that they would be ready to receive the good news. Because, you see, you can't teach somebody who knows everything anything. And they needed to understand that there was more they needed to receive: getting their hearts and their minds in the right space to receive the message.

There are a lot of folks in my estimation as I view the world, who need the message of Jesus this season. Amen? They need to receive this blessing. They need to receive this joy. There are some folks that, and I have been trying to figure out a way to say this politely, but some folks during this season are just nauseatingly joyful. Sometimes I wonder if they're missing the point, too, because Jesus was born to die and to give His life a ransom for many. And it is joyful and it's awesome and it's wonderful that God loves us that much, but sometimes we get caught up in the commercialization and all

the stuff and the tinsels and we forget the meaning. For others of us, the season is a mixed bag: there's good stuff and bad stuff, but we need to be reminded of the true message. And then for others of us, the holidays are hard. John came preparing the way for people to receive the message of Christ. My friends, it's our privilege, our privilege and our responsibility to help people receive the message of the season. As John the Baptist prepared the way for Messiah, it's our privilege to prepare the way for other folks to receive the joy and the true meaning of Christmas. As I was preparing this message, I was trying to think of what we could do, the different specific things that we could do to help prepare the way in small ways and big ways, to be a blessing to others, to help them receive the message of Christmas. And it hit me, after about two days of that, how arrogant I was being. Who am I to tell you what you need to do to help the people in your life? It's not my job. That's the Holy Spirit's job. Our job is to get our hearts and our minds right with God so that God can communicate with us how we can be John the Baptist for others, how we can prepare the way for others to receive the true meaning and the true joy of the season. If that's not our responsibility, whose responsibility is it? That's our job. So, on this, the second Sunday of Advent, my challenge to you is to get your life and yourself in such a position that you can hear the Spirit and see the opportunities of sharing the love, the joy and the meaning of this season with our world that desperately needs some good news. That's our responsibility, not somebody else's. Let's pray. So, during this time of quiet, listen. The Spirit of God is speaking now and throughout this time, this season. Pray about how you can be John the Baptist for others, how you can help people prepare their hearts, their minds, their lives, to receive the joy of the season and its true meaning. Would you do that? Let's pray.

Lord, hear not the words of our mouth but hear the meditation of our hearts. Know our sincerity and know first of all our gratitude for the greatest gift ever given. Remind us also, Lord, with receiving that gift comes responsibility; responsibility of sharing that gift with others. So, during this season, we pray for small ways and big ways that we might be a blessing to others in Christ's name. Amen.