

December 17, 2023
Advent 3: Stay Awhile Series: Prepare
John 1:1-8, 19-28

Well, are you ready for Christmas? Every year at this time, this question replaces the obligatory “How are you?” Thursday, I was at the dentist’s office, and just as the hygienist started cleaning my teeth, she asked me if I was ready for Christmas. I think she expected that I would just nod my answer, and I did. I shook my head no but thought to myself, it really isn’t that simple. Did she mean am I ready for Christmas at home or at church? And then it occurred to me that it didn’t matter; it really is that simple; the answer is no, regardless.

How about you? Are you ready for Christmas? Let’s have a quick check on how your preparations are going. How many of you have done the decorating you plan to do? How many of you have finished shopping? How about wrapping? There is no judgment here at all. There is a lot to do.

So far in our series, we have invited, and we have planned...we are in the homestretch. It is time to PREPARE. It is time to not only talk about getting ready but to do the work of getting ready. Our fancy table in the sanctuary is prepared and the stable is prepared. What else is there to do? If John the Baptist was here, I feel like he would tell us to prepare the way for Jesus, which basically means...find ways to point people to Jesus.

This morning’s text features John the Baptist. It is from the Gospel of John. Of the four gospels in the biblical canon, this one was written last. Like the Gospel of Mark, it does not include a Jesus birth story but instead focuses on his ministry as an adult. The Gospel of John, written at least 3 generations after Jesus’ death, came out of a community of Jewish Mystics. This community was different, not only from Gentile (non-Jewish) communities but also from traditional Jewish communities. It is probable, in fact, that the writers and the original readers of this book had been excommunicated from their Jewish community. Because of that, in places throughout the book, the author presents Jewish leaders in a very negative light, including in our text this morning. We must be careful not to interpret this text in ways that are anti-Semitic but within the context of Jewish people who had basically been called heretics and been asked to leave their community. Their criticism was with particular leaders, not the faith tradition, and came out of their experiences in that time and place.

Following the familiar prologue about Jesus being the word and the light, the narrative jumps immediately into John the Baptist’s story.
This is John 1:6-8, 19-28.

⁶There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light,

but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but he confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²²Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³He said,

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, "Why, then, are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandal." ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

John had caught the attention of the religious leaders, and they had questions. "Who are you? Are you the prophet? Are you Elijah?" He answered no to all those questions. So, the religious leaders circled back, "Then who are you?" Having been a youth minister for a very long time, this text always makes me think of the game two truths and a lie. I feel like it would have been fun for John to suggest playing that game. In the game, everyone thinks of two true things about themselves and one lie. And then they tell them to the group and the group decides which one is the lie. We should play.

Ben, would you like to go first?

We have time for one more...Maria!

I can imagine when it was John the Baptist's turn he would say something like:

I eat bugs.

I am the Messiah.

I am not the prophet Elijah.

The lie, of course, is that John was the Messiah...he was not.

John was clear about who he wasn't, and he was clear about who he was and what he came to do. Today, we would say that he was good at staying in his own lane. He was laser-focused on doing one thing: pointing people to Jesus.

From the perspective of the Jewish leaders, though, he was a stranger who had amassed a following using an accessible message that was becoming quite popular. He was also immersing people in water, which gave off a definite spiritual authority vibe. This was all potentially risky given that such a rogue leader could encourage an

uprising – not something the Jewish leaders wanted and certainly not something that the Romans would tolerate.

So, the religious leaders were dispatched to figure him out. John told them straight up who he was and wasn't. And maybe most troubling to the leaders, he announced that, while he is not the spiritual authority, there was someone else coming along who was. Would that mean they were not the authorities? They must have been bewildered at this man who was humble and positioned himself as inferior to the one to come. How unusual...he was someone with a following and yet didn't want to use his position to elevate himself. Instead, he prepared them for a still-unnamed person who would come as the Messiah, for whom they had waited and hoped. Of course, we've read the story; the person he was preparing them for was Jesus.

To understand what was at stake for the Israelites, we must understand what they were expecting in a Messiah. Christianity got a hold of the word Messiah and turned it into something it wasn't. The Christian tradition has talked about the Messiah in terms of Jesus sacrificing his life in atonement for the sins of human beings, saving us from our sins. Some Christians believe that if it hadn't been for Jesus, our sinfulness, which they believe we were born with, would keep us from God for all eternity. This understanding of Jesus' role is not what I believe, and it is certainly far afield from what the Jewish people in Jesus' day and even early Christians meant when they hoped for their Messiah. They believed the Messiah was going to save them from the oppression they were experiencing in their lives here on earth. They believed that in the Messiah, they would finally have a leader who represented God and God's ways of equity, justice, and peace. When the Messiah came, they would have their godly king, and there would finally be shalom.

So, John wasn't preparing the people for some promise of eternal life that they had to earn by saying and doing and believing all the right things, he was calling them to make way for a new world right here. Imagine what would happen in the world if Christians believed that Jesus was more concerned with what happens here than he was about what happens when we die. Certainly, the Christian missionary movement would be a lot different. We'd be taking food and water and medicine to people and leaving the Bibles at home.

The text tells us that John was baptizing his followers. I don't know what you believe about baptism, but whatever it is, it is probably not what John was practicing. Likely, what John was doing was more like a ritual cleansing...a preparation for what was to come. Kind of a "let's get our ducks in a row thing" before the Messiah comes and things get busy. Truthfully, scholars disagree about what exactly this ritual was. I think what's most important for our purposes is to keep in mind that the people this gospel was written among were Jewish, and we should not co-op their practices into something that is uniquely Christian. John's message was that God was doing a new

thing, and the water ritual he was performing was one way in which the people prepared to be part of it.

Here we are, a week before the celebration of Jesus' birth. And I hope we all can acknowledge and celebrate that the Holy is doing new things every single day through all of us and all our neighbors, even though the problems the people faced 2000 years ago still exist today. That's why the world still needs hope that inspires us to change so that the world can change; the world still needs peace that allows us to build bridges to and relationships with our neighbors; and the world still needs joy that comes from meaningful work and service to others.

The story of John the Baptist has been linked to joy from the beginning. In the Gospel of Luke, the author tells us that when Mary went to see her cousin, Elizabeth, both women were pregnant, Mary with Jesus and Elizabeth with John. When Mary arrived, the story says the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy. John started out joyful, and perhaps he was able to stay in his lane, pointing others to Jesus precisely because of joy, the kind of deep joy that comes from serving. Maybe, as he was preparing his followers for Jesus' ministry, he felt a little bit like we do as we prepare for good things. Maybe he had so internalized what the world would be like when Jesus got a hold of it that he felt the kind of joy we feel when the person for whom we have found the perfect gift is getting ready to unwrap it. The message of love Jesus brought to his followers, then and now, was and is a pretty good gift.

What brings you that kind of joy? Yesterday, some of us met at ElderCare to pack Christmas baskets and deliver them. There was joy in that place...and it wasn't just the donuts. The joy came from working with our community partners and doing something good together. And we got to see the joy the baskets bring to ElderCare clients as we delivered them. The joy that comes through the work we are called to, the work of justice, inclusion, compassion, and peacemaking, is a two-for-one good thing. The work we do, the work you do, brings healing and hope to so many people, which certainly translates to joy, and that joy that we get from the work...that joy is loose in the world. And you know joy changes a lot of things. I've seen it firsthand.

I've been in a hospital room with a family whose loved one is dying. And everything changes when the family's newest baby comes into the room. Even as we say good-bye to people we love, God is always doing a new thing. It reminds me of Mister Rogers' advice to parents who are talking to their children about tragedies. He invited them to "Look for the helpers." Awful things happen every single day. And every single day, people step up to serve each other. There is joy in that service. And joy is contagious. So, dear ones, go infect the world. Amen.

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