

Getting into the Spirit of the Season

In the name of him whose way John the Baptizer prepared, dear friends in Christ: It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. I'm sure you've noticed. Here in the church, in your homes, around your neighborhoods, and certainly in the businesses that are urging you to do your holiday shopping early, all the festive signs of the season are becoming evident. There are lights and glittering decorations, greenery and candles, ribbons and bows, and wafting over it all are the familiar sounds of your favorite (and maybe some of your not-so-favorite) Christmas carols. Everywhere, it seems, you can hear the decked halls echoing with these songs of holiday cheer urging us to get into the spirit of things by reminding us "'tis the season to be jolly". Everywhere, that is, except here in the Church where, judging from that last little number especially, there are no sounds of joy – at least not yet anyway.

Why's that? It's because we're not ready for it. We're still *preparing for* Christmas. It isn't here yet. And in all of our holiday preparations we don't want to neglect the most important part, which is the very heart of what Christmas is all about. We're soon to celebrate the mystery of God the Son, the Eternal Word, becoming flesh. We're going to be celebrating the birth of our Savior who became like us in order to give his life for us. And for us to understand and fully appreciate what a joyful event *that is*, we must get a firm grip on why our gracious and loving God had to do that for us in the first place. We have to understand and appreciate exactly what it is we need saving from.

To help us in that regard, the Lord has sent us St. John the Baptizer. It's his job to get us ready. His is the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord". But to hear that voice, if you lived when John was doing his ministry, you couldn't just hop in your comfortable car and take a ten minute drive over to the church where you'd sit in padded pew in a climate controlled building like we can. Back then, you couldn't even have walked over to your local synagogue and sat on a wooden bench to listen to him. No, to hear John you would have to make a full blown pilgrimage. It would be a journey of somewhere between fifteen and fifty miles depending on where you lived in Judah or Galilee, and would involve a climb of some three thousand feet up and over the Judean heights followed by a descent of forty-two hundred feet down the twisting rock strewn trail that wound down the shade-less eastern escarpment of those mountains. You'd arrive at length at the bottom of the Jordan River Valley. The heat down there on the desert floor is brutal. And at over a thousand feet below sea level, the wind rarely stirs to offer you any relief. It's more like an oven: the sun cooking you from the top and the scorching sand radiating heat back at you from underneath. When the wind *does* manage to blow, it comes at you hard and heavy like waves of heat from a blast furnace; blowing sand into your eyes, your ears, your mouth, and every other nook and cranny of your being where grit tends to accumulate.

Through this otherwise waterless wasteland the Jordan River makes its slow, sluggish trek to the Dead Sea like a long, twisting green snake. And there amid the scrub brush and reeds that line the banks of that brackish stream John stands calling. He's calling you away from the comforts of hearth and home and everything else that makes life easy and bearable.

But let's imagine you made that trek. You've heard a lot about John. Practically everyone is talking about him. They're saying that there's no one preaching God's Word with the power and authority that he does. So you came all the way down to hear him for yourself.

And now you stand before him in the crowd. You're hot, thirsty, and weary from your journey. Your feet are sore and burning, probably blistered, and bleeding from stubbing your toes on rocks. There's dried sweat, desert grit, and salt clinging to you and irritating your skin. You don't smell so good – and neither do the people crowding around you. You'd like to get upwind of them; but today the air isn't moving. It's stifling. You're just about as miserable as you can be. And you're thinking to yourself, "This had better be worth it."

Over in the distance John is standing in the water with the remainder of a group that heard him speak a couple of hours ago. He's dealing with each person individually now, so it's taking some time. You can't hear what he's saying to them. They're asking him questions and he's responding. You notice that as he finishes with each one, he pours several handfuls of water over their heads, offers a prayer and a blessing of some kind, and then sends them on their way. From here he seems to be very caring and gentle with people. At least, that's the way he strikes you. This won't be so bad, you think.

But you're still standing with a growing group that has been waiting all this time for his next public message. You're becoming a bit impatient – like I said, you're feeling pretty miserable. Then, after what seems like an eternity, he finishes up with the last one of the preceding group. He looks wearily in your direction, sighs deeply and wipes his brow, and then ambles over to you like a man bearing a heavy burden.

You expect that he'll begin by welcoming you and thanking you for making the long trip and for waiting so patiently. You think that maybe he'll even commend you for the sacrifice and the pursuit of greater spirituality that it demonstrates. But that's *not* what happens. Instead he begins his message by pointing a gnarled finger at you – right at you personally it seems – and in what can only be called righteous indignation he begins to yell at you like a drill sergeant. "*What are you doing here? You black-hearted spawn of Satan! Who even bothered wasting the time to warn a worthless sinner like you to flee from the wrath of God that's about to fall?*"

Wow. Didn't see that coming. You're taken aback. Is he for real? But there's no let up. He just goes on with this scathing indictment. It's a full assault on your character. Without mercy or restraint, he accuses you of every sin you've ever heard of and some you've never even imagined. The thing of it is, he makes the charges stick. He's got you pegged. And he knows exactly how to counter all your defenses. It's like he can read your mind. You think, "Aw, c'mon now. Yes, I'm a sinner like everyone else; but I'm not *that* bad, not nearly as bad as you're painting it. I'm really pretty good most of the time. I'd say a bit better than most people even." But it's no good. He's all over you. That very thought is one of your worse sins, he says, because by it you close your eyes to the truth and you refuse to see the filth God sees in your heart. With it you give yourself a pardon, calling "satisfactory" or "passable" what God in fury condemns to hell. How dare you diminish God's perfect standards? How dare you exalt your judgment over his and thereby call him a liar?

John begins to get at you. He makes you feel as hot and uncomfortable in your spirit as you do in your body. He causes you to hate what you are. He makes you long for some relief, some way to cleanse and cool and soothe your tortured soul. He makes you want to change, to be someone different, to be someone worthy of being called a child of God. He makes you fall to your knees in fear and trembling before the holiness of God, weeping tears of heartfelt sorrow and crying out for mercy that you know you do not deserve. Then and only then, my friends, are you in the proper spirit of the season. Only then you are ready to go with John into the Jordan to be washed in the name of him who comes to save you.

With that in mind, let me ask you this: what would John say *to you* today? What would he have to say to get *you* to that point? Listen to him now. What's he saying? How is he accusing you personally? And let me say this: if you can listen to him without sweat breaking out on your forehead and without you feeling a trembling deep in your soul, then you're only deceiving yourself. You aren't really listening to what John is saying.

Or you're dismissing it. We do that a lot. In fact we of all people are most likely to be immune to his scathing accusations. We've heard them all before and so they tend to go in one ear and out the other. Besides, we prefer to accentuate the positive. We want to counter his attack with what we think we have to our credit. So, for example, while we might admit that there's some validity to what he's saying, "Yes, I'm a sinner", immediately we want to tack on, "but just look how far I've come. Oh, I'm much better than I used to be. I've given up the some really big sins and bad habits I used to have. Surely I get some credit for that. Don't I? Haven't I by now worked myself up to a level where I can back off a bit" – which is to say that God ought to be happy with something less than perfection. It isn't going to happen. The Lord will never accept sin of any kind in you. You need to adjust your thinking to his unyielding standard.

Or perhaps we might defend ourselves with our holiness credentials. That's what some of John's original hearers did. They tried to escape his tirade by pulling their chosen people immunity card. "We're children of Abraham", they said. "We're heirs of the promise. God loves us just the way we are." "Don't even think of trying that pitiful excuse", says John, "God can make more faithful and obedient children of Abraham from these stones. He doesn't need you. And if you keep behaving the way you are, he'll cast you away like a stone." John says the same thing to us when we try similar defenses: "Hey, I was baptized. I went to a Christian school. I was confirmed. I attend church regularly (sort of). I've served as an officer of the church. I teach Sunday school. I pay my dues. I pray every day, and do my *Portals of Prayer* devotions." What? And you think all that now gives you permission to be something less than God demands? What unmitigated gall. You're only adding pride and self-righteousness to your sin making it worse.

But you know the way we Lutherans most often escape from John's attack is to run too quickly to the Gospel. As soon as we hear even the hint of an accusation coming we deflect it with the forgiveness we have in Christ. It's like we're playing table tennis, knocking back the Law's demands with Christ as our paddle. "Look at this sin in your life." "Ah-ah [tic], I'm forgiven!" "What about this?" "Nope! [tic] I've got Jesus. Can't get me there!" You see what happens, though, is that the Law never gets a chance to do its very necessary and painful work. By leaping too quickly to God's forgiveness, we skip right over the all important steps of sorrow for sin and repentance. So doing, we build our hope and confidence of salvation not on the true Gospel, but a half-baked imitation of it. It's a house of cards. It won't stand on the Day of Judgment. Nor does it change your life in the present because you're never really struggling with your sin and trying to turn from it. "Why should I? I'm forgiven, aren't I?"

"Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." The more confident you are of your standing before God, the more fearful you ought to be that his judgment will fall on you without mercy. Jesus died to deliver you *from* your sin; not to give you license to continue wallowing in it.

So again I ask you: What is John saying to you today? What peaks of pride and self-deception need to be cut down? What valleys of sin need to be filled? And remember, we're not talking about your standards of relative goodness; we're talking about God's absolute demand for perfection in your life: that you love all people, even your enemies, as yourself; that

you honor and obey those whom the Lord has placed in positions of authority over you; that you remain sexually pure in thought, word, and deed by God's definitions rather than those of our permissive culture's; that you do what's in your power to protect and defend the reputation of others; that you reach out to those in need, freely sharing the gifts God has given you; that you befriend strangers, speak up for the downtrodden, and pray for your persecutors; that you be a good steward of the time, treasure, and talents God has given you and put them to work for the good of all people; that you remain content and grateful to God in any and every circumstance.

I could go on; but I'm just taking shot gun blasts at big targets. John's got a sniper rifle. He knows how to hit you where it hurts – and so do you. You know the spots. Feel him hit you there with his words. Own the guilt of your sin. Feel God's unrelenting wrath and tremble in fear.

Only then will you be in the proper spirit of the season. Then John will have prepared you to receive the Savior, Jesus Christ the Lord, and the forgiveness he was born to achieve. May God grant it to you this Advent so that your preparations may bear the fruit of true repentance for your good and for the glory of God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!