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Advent 2 – Matthew 3:1-12 – Hearts Prepared for the Coming of the Lord

11/30-12/4/22 – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, WI

It had been four hundred years since the prophet Malachi promised that Elijah would come as a messenger to herald the coming of the Messiah, the Lord's true Savior-King. For four hundred years Israel had been without a prophet; these were called the silent years, because the Word of the Lord came... to nobody. That is, until a priest named Zechariah was chosen by lot to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

Then things changed. That prophecy from Malachi we just mentioned was about to be fulfilled. Elijah was about to come... from the womb of Zechariah's aged and barren wife. And this from the mouth of an angel of God: "*Many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord,*" he said. "*And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*"

And so John the Baptist came as promised, given that singular, vital task from God, that unique role in the plan of salvation – to be the forerunner to the Savior, to make hearts prepared for the coming King. It's just like his father said the first time he held that miracle baby in his arms, "*You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God.*"

It was common practice in those days for someone to go on before a traveling king to prepare the people and the road for his coming to make his trip as smooth as possible. You didn't want your king having to come through your town on rough roads; that was a slight kings usually didn't forget. So just like Isaiah's prophecy said, John grew up and went out to live in the desert according to God's special plan and purpose, and his message was "*prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.*"

Well obviously he caught the people's attention, because he drew droves from Jerusalem and Judea out to hear him. He certainly looked the part – when the Jews saw camel's hair clothing and a leather belt they immediately knew that as the uniform of a great prophet, just like we all know the uniform of a policeman or a football player. But especially what drew all those people to John was his message that believing hearts had longed for for centuries or more: "Prepare your hearts, because the King is coming behind me."

It was important for people expecting their earthly ruler to heed the word of the forerunner: "Make sure you're ready, because you don't want your king to find you unprepared." But

John came as no ordinary herald of no ordinary earthly king. It was so much more important for people to heed the call of God's specially appointed messenger, because he foretold the coming of the Prince of Peace with healing and salvation. The stakes were so much higher.

But for those who despised his coming, John's message was a warning. The King *is* coming. *Do not* let him find you unprepared. Straighten out the crooked paths in your life; repent, and confess your sins. And that message still echoes today, too. For any who refuse to acknowledge their King in their hearts and by their actions, the fire of God's wrath is what they'll have to answer to, John said.

So let's not be like those Pharisees and Sadducees who thought they were good with God because of their own righteousness and the blood running through their veins, because otherwise John's warning is also for us: "*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*" In God's eyes, it doesn't matter who you are, what you've done, what family you belong to, or how long you've been a member of the church. Having an attitude as smug as those Jewish religious leaders means that a person's heart is stone-cold and they're like a tree that deserves only to be cut down and burned.

So when our King comes, do we want the things of this world to be sitting on the throne of our hearts that rightly belongs only to God? This holiday season makes it so very easy to worry more about presents and parties and decorations than wholeheartedly remembering and celebrating the coming of our Savior. Or maybe it's really not *things* we put on God's throne – it's us, just like those Jewish religious leaders did. But that's how it is when we decide to do and believe whatever we want rather than what God says is right in his Word. Or when we won't call something sin because it's popular or because we like the person doing it. Or when we think that because our name is on a church membership roster, that means we don't actually have to come to God's house regularly for worship like he wants to feed our souls and give him the honor he deserves.

In those cases, John still calls: the ax of God's judgment is at the foot of the tree, ready to chop down whoever has faith as dead as firewood. So let it cut the sin out of your soul, rather than cut your soul out of heaven. Repent and believe, John says, because your King is coming and he wants to bring you the salvation you need and that you've so eagerly awaited!

You know, John's message, his ministry, his whole life was really a testimony to his call, "Get ready!" I mean, he lived in a desert and wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. It doesn't get much less worldly than that! His clothing and food testified to the one thing needful in his life – his relationship with his Savior-God.

God wanted to get his people's attention so he sent them a messenger who would be totally devoted to Him: how he dressed, how he ate, even how he did his hair! He obviously wasn't too concerned with fashion and the finest amenities. No, the most important thing in John's life was obeying God's Word and doing God's Will.

And you know what? He was *good* at it! People were amazed at him and flocked to him! They crowded around him because they hadn't seen anyone who compared to him for four hundred years or more. Look at this guy! Listen to this guy! He's like the great prophet Elijah! And later on Jesus had even bigger compliments to give. He said, "*I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.*" Anyone, ever!

But you know what John said about all that? Look, I'm nobody compared to the one who's coming behind me. I'm not even worthy to untie his shoes or carry his sandals. For them, that was a slave's job to take off his master's sandals and wash his feet. So that means John considered himself less than the lowliest slave next to Jesus, despite all that praise. "*He must become greater; I must become less,*" John once said. John wasn't there to impress anybody or be the center of anybody's attention. The only reason John came was to prepare hearts for the coming of the Lord.

And so John encouraged people to "*produce fruit in keeping with repentance.*" If he were here today, he'd probably say that video games and toys (for all ages), activities and all the time and equipment that go with them... they're good, they're fun, they're blessings from God – just don't let them get in the way of feeding your faith like you need and honoring God like he deserves. Don't be too busy to prepare your hearts for the Lord's coming this Christmas season! When your King speaks, listen. Be faithful to his Word, above all else.

And prepare your hearts, because your King is coming! But that's an awfully hard thing to hear when our hearts are as naturally crooked and unprepared as they are. But here's how much your king loves you: He didn't send his herald empty-handed. "*People went out to [John] from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.*"

Last week was about watching and being ready for Christ's coming. This week is about what God himself does to *make* us ready for his coming through his Word and Sacraments. Truthfully, our hearts are hopelessly crooked and unprepared, so much so that we could never hope to fix them ourselves and the only one who could possibly straighten them out is the Lord himself. So thank God that's exactly what he does for us in holy baptism – that same baptism that John brought, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

See, in baptism God washes away our sins and puts faith in our hearts; he drowns the sinful nature inside of us, he adopts us as his own dear children, and he takes the throne of our hearts that is rightly his. And that's something the devil can never take away from us, no matter how many times we fall into temptation. Our King has come to us to save us, and our baptism is undeniable proof that our hearts belong to him and no one else. That's our motivation to live in repentance and our comfort for when we fail.

And just as he sent John the Baptist to be a forerunner to Jesus' first coming, God still provides pastors and teachers who ready his people for Jesus' second coming. Faithful pastors and teachers are some of God's greatest blessings to you, because it's through them that God made sure you heard the message of how much he loves you and what he's done for you and for your salvation.

Every faithful Gospel minister you meet is a tool that God uses to prepare your hearts to one day meet your King by sharing Law and Gospel from God's Word. There we hear that though we also aren't worthy to stoop down and untie Jesus' sandals, he was willing to be the servant of all, not only washing his disciples' feet but even laying down his life for them and for all of us. There he assures us that he still works through water and the Word to bring people to faith, to strengthen people in faith, and to work repentance and a faithful, God-pleasing life. And there he promises us that like a farmer separating the good wheat from the worthless chaff, he will certainly gather us to himself one day to be with him in his heavenly Kingdom forever.

So my brothers and sisters... how can you best prepare your hearts for your coming King? Well, you can be right here and let him do it for you. It's God's will that we continue to hear and learn His Word and be strengthened through his Supper, because here in his house he makes that same promise, that God loves us, he's saved us, he's forgiven our sins and won heaven for us, and so we *are* ready for when he comes again. So even though it's been almost two thousand years now since the time of John, this Christmas season and always his message still echoes for all to hear: "Prepare your hearts for the coming of the Lord!" And friends, that's exactly what our King intends to do for us. So come, Lord Jesus! Amen.