

Get Ready

Matthew 3:1-12

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This waiting thing is getting difficult. Last week it wasn't too tough to talk about waiting during Advent, to wait expectantly for the birth of the Christ-child and for the second coming of the Messiah. We dreamed of the impossible becoming reality, of all nations streaming to the holy mountain to be instructed by God, and being so transformed by God's words that they become people of peace who spend their energies on life-giving nurture rather than wars and conflict. We had barely passed Thanksgiving, and so it was easy to make fun of those who put up their Christmas lights around Halloween and missed the concept of Advent altogether.

This week, the gospel text is like that second dose of medicine: you know the first one wasn't quite enough, but can't you just feel better already? This is Year A in the three-year cycle we follow of Scripture readings, and so we spend Advent in the gospel of Matthew. There are only two gospels that tell the romantic, dramatic story of Jesus' birth, the beautiful, harsh story of Christmas, and Matthew is one of them! But the mean old lectionary won't give it to us yet. We're a little closer this week, but as much as I want to skip ahead and turn back the pages, we don't get to the birth narrative until the last Sunday before Christmas. And I guess that's the point, isn't it? We're waiting. But we're not just sitting around: we're getting ready.

I don't know about you, but I've done a little Christmas "preparation" this week. My tree is up and at least mostly decorated (when my child hasn't removed whatever ornaments she can reach). I've listened to a little Christmas music. I've even watched part of a Christmas movie. But our gospel text today asks us to do something different in preparation for Jesus' arrival: to prepare not our homes, but our hearts.

Now you already know that the season of Advent – and the holy day of Christmas – is a looking back and a present celebration and a looking forward. It's all three of Scrooge's ghosts together: Christmas past, Christmas present, and Christmas future. I think we usually tend to focus on Christmas past: the baby who was born in the manger because there was no room for them in the inn. We tell the story again and again – and we *should* because it has irrevocably changed the world the way no other moment in time ever has. It's something to remember. And now and then we also think of Christmas future: that we're waiting for Jesus not only to be born in the manger of long ago, but to come again in glory and establish the fullness of his kingdom. But I, for one, rarely think about Christmas present – what it means that Christ is coming *now*. For *me*.

Now, I don't want to fall off the edge of communitarian theology and lodge myself – or you – in the world where all that matters is my own personal relationship with Jesus. I believe strongly that sin and redemption, salvation and sanctification, our lives, our brokenness, and our becoming holy are all wrapped up in each other: we are relational people, our faith is a community's faith, and I won't pretend that "me and Jesus" is all that matters when people are dying of hunger and being persecuted because of who they love or what shade their skin is or where they've come from.

But I think sometimes we progressive Christians can forget all about "me and Jesus." And when we do, we look at Christmas past and maybe Christmas future, but we ignore altogether that Christmas is an opportunity for us to welcome again the birth of Christ in our own hearts. It's a

time for us to start fresh, to begin again, to open ourselves to God's Spirit knowing full well that God intends to set up camp within us, wreaking havoc on all of our best-laid plans and taking up more space than we initially thought we'd offered.

And today's lesson from Matthew's gospel invites us to get ready for *that*. In the story we just heard so beautifully read, it sounds like a crazy man has wriggled his way into the holy Scriptures. His name is John, and he happens to be related to Jesus. This may make us think of all the crazy folks in our own families who we try to keep quiet when the larger crowds have gathered... but John's message here is loud and clear. He looks quite odd, dressed in the same outfit that Elijah the prophet wore 800 years before: camel's hair and a leather belt... but lest you imagine a camel *coat* and a the kind of leather belt that you or I would wear, remember that John did not purchase this outfit at the Nordstrom half-yearly sale. He would have been wearing, say, the skin of a camel – no brass buttons anywhere. And the hide of a cow tied around his waist to keep the camel skin on.

And John, in his 800-year-old outfit, is standing out in the wilderness, proclaiming, loudly, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Now if he was out in the "wilderness" near Tacoma, what do you think we'd do? I'm not sure. Maybe we'd ignore him; or call the cops; or try to have him committed. We'd probably assume he was on something. Or maybe the more daring of us would trek on out to the wilderness to have a look at such a spectacle. But the people of the great holy city, Jerusalem, and all the region around there, went out to John in the wilderness to confess their sins, not to gawk; and they experienced the first baptisms in recorded history.

Now we may read this passage and shrink back a little: first the crazy man shows up out in the wilderness and the people go out to get baptized, ok; but then the religious people – the church people – come out, and he rebukes them, calling them a "brood of vipers." And he talks about the axe at the root of the tree and the winnowing-fork and the chaff being burned with unquenchable fire... And it doesn't sound like a super-cheery Christmas message, does it? It sounds like one of those times when you might want to kind of ignore the Scripture and talk about something else.

But I have to believe that the people went rushing out into the wilderness, away from the center of religious life, away from the temple and the power and the authorities, because they needed something the old religious establishment wasn't offering – something they saw in John. Remember that for the Israelites, the wilderness was both a place of salvation and a place of judgment. It signified their freedom from slavery when Moses rescued them from Pharaoh in the book of Exodus. But it was also the place that they sinned and failed to trust God again and again, breaking covenant after covenant, until an entire generation perished in the wilderness and never got to see the Promised Land. While cultural power all resided in the city, in the temple, with the priests and the scribes, spiritual power was out in the wilderness, for better or worse.

And the people streamed out to John from the whole region for both judgment and salvation again. They went out to hear what he had to say, but also to start fresh. He offered them a chance to come clean by confessing their sins and being washed in the river. He gave them the opportunity to start over: women, men, young, old, the most notorious of sinners- folks who would not have been allowed *near* the temple priests... this baptism hadn't taken place before, so there were no rules, no sanctions. And when the Pharisees and Sadducees came out – the NRSV says "for" baptism, but the Greek preposition can also be translated "against" baptism – John let

them know that saying they're in the elite class, that they're related to Abraham, that they've been devoted church members basically forever and have won all kinds of perfect attendance awards – isn't enough. John let them know that Someone was coming, someone so amazing, so incredible, so powerful that it would not be enough to sit around waiting for his arrival, then to claim their place of entitlement. It was time to prepare so that when this special Someone came they would be ready, and He could walk a straight path right to their doors.¹

Meister Eckhart, a German mystic of the 13th century, wrote, "When all things lay in the midst of silence, then leapt there down into me from on high, from the royal throne, a secret word."² When John the Baptist invites us out to the wilderness and tells us, through Matthew's gospel, to repent and confess our sins to prepare the way of the Lord, he's asking us to cleanse our hearts, to get down into the silence where the Word of God can speak and be born in us anew. He's offering us a chance to start fresh, to be washed, to begin again. He's offering us a chance to die to ourselves so that we can be born with Christ on Christmas morning.

Even now, even a few weeks away, even in the midst of the beauty and cheeriness and busyness of the season, we all have our wilderness, and our excuses for not going there. But if we listen deep down, there is a voice, perhaps far away and indistinct, but still calling out, beckoning us to come wipe the slate clean and start anew; calling us to prepare the way of the Lord, so that our Christmas may not be just about remembering the past or waiting for the future, but taking part in what God is doing *now*. "Let every heart prepare him room."³ For he *is* coming.

Amen.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Where the Way May Lead," *Home By Another Way* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1999), 13.

² Meister Eckhart, "Where God Enters," *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 55. Eckhart quotes this as a saying of "the wise man."

³ From the great Christmas carol, "Joy to the World," Isaac Watts (words), 1719 and G. F. Handel (music), 1741.