

SERMON: Prepare: Repent and Bear Fruit

TEXT: Matthew 3:1-12

The church I served in Springfield, Missouri, also ran a daycare, and I used to take time once a week to read a story or share a message with the children. One of the books I enjoyed reading to them was called, *If Jesus Came to My House*. It was written from the point of view of a child who wanted to have Jesus as a friend and playmate.

“If Jesus came to my house and knocked upon the door, I’m sure I’d be more happy than I’ve ever been before.” The child continues to imagine Jesus being about the same size and age as he, offering him the most comfortable chair, and letting him have the longest ride on the rocking horse. “When we were done we’d stack the toys all neatly on the shelf, but first I’d let him choose the best and keep them for himself.” (Joan G. Thomas, *If Jesus Came to My House*, Harper Collins Publishers)

I wonder how I would prepare my house and how I would want to act if I were expecting Jesus to visit. I would definitely watch less TV. Maybe I would put certain things away; maybe I would put other things in a more prominent position. I would probably take a couple of trunk loads of stuff I

don't need to Teen Challenge or Goodwill to provide for those less fortunate.

I wonder if we would do anything different in the church for a visit from Jesus. Maybe we would pay more attention to the words of the scriptures and hymns and prayers. Maybe we would genuinely try to repent of the sins we confess in the prayer of confession. Immediately after worship would we go out to try and right the wrongs we've done? To make sure we show that we're sorry, not just by saying the words, but by changing our actions?

I remember a friend I had a long time ago, who told me a story about a homeless man who huddled in the doorway of a storefront near where she worked. She walked past him every morning going to work, and she could even see him from the window of her office. She often thought about him and prayed for him, but didn't really know how to help him. She knew there was a shelter in town and wondered why he didn't go there. Clearly there were others looking after him, as occasionally she'd see him with a sack of food from MacDonald's or covered up with a new blanket. One day she had a feeling she should check on him, but she quickly convinced herself he was

fine, and she needed to get to work. Later in the day when he normally would have moved from his sleeping spot, he was still there. Again, she had a nagging feeling something wasn't right. But it was cold, and she really didn't have time to go outside; she wouldn't know what to do when she got there anyway. The next morning he was gone, and she learned that he had died. Even though years had passed, she wept tears filled with shame and sorrow as she told me.

From the Gospel of Matthew, we read about John the Baptist, who appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

Chronologically, the story of John comes years after the birth of Jesus, as they were only about six months apart in age. Yet, John's voice cries out to us still as we wait for Jesus to come again. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

You know, whether we're waiting for a baby in a manger or waiting for our risen Savior to appear on earth, it seems at this time of year that we expect Jesus to come and make everything right. The world is in a shambles, our lives are in turmoil, and we are desperate for Jesus to come and fix it. We expect him to bring the gifts of hope, peace, love, and joy while we sit bake cookies and go to parties and spend more money than we have. But it doesn't work that way. Hear again those words of John the Baptist: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

He's talking to us, you know. He's crying out to us, "Yes, Jesus is coming, but you've got to make way; you've got to clear a path for him." He cannot come into our lives unless we invite him. He cannot bring us hope if we've already given up. He cannot bring us peace unless we are willing to stop fighting. He cannot bring us love until our hearts are ready to stop hating. And he cannot bring us joy until we're ready to put away our bitterness.

Back in the wilderness, John also said this: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." REPENT. That's what it means to "prepare the way of the Lord; [to] make his paths straight." But what does it mean to

repent? The dictionary says that repent is a verb meaning “to turn from sin and resolve to reform one’s life.”

Repentance comes after confession. You know you’ve done wrong; you’ve admitted your mistakes, and now it’s time to make things right.

When I am teaching older children about baptism, I talk about that promise that we or our parents make “to turn away from sin and to renounce evil and its power in the world, and to turn toward Jesus Christ and accept him as Lord and Savior.” I show them what this means by asking them to walk in one direction. Then I tell them that they’re going toward sin, and if they don’t want to do that, they should turn around and go the other way. The way that leads to Jesus. This is what it means to repent. You turn and go the other way. You don’t just say “I’m sorry” and keep heading down that same road. You have to change course.

Finally, John the Baptist told those coming for baptism to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.” He knew that the Pharisees and Sadducees especially would try to take a free ride on the coattails of Abraham. So, he warned them, “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up

children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Bear fruit worthy of repentance. It means that our repentance needs to be genuine. It needs to be productive. It needs to be demonstrated. My friend who never helped the homeless man has certainly acknowledged and confessed her wrongdoing. And she can say that she’s repented, but her repentance is genuine only if she has changed her ways. Only if she has begun volunteering for the homeless or donating to a shelter is she bearing fruit worthy of repentance.

And in the book *If Jesus Came to My House*, the best part of the story is the second half, where the boy acknowledges that Jesus can’t really come to visit him. But he also realizes that he can still welcome Jesus by welcoming others. “And though he may not occupy my cozy rocking chair, a lot of other people would be happy sitting there. And I can make him welcome as he himself has said, by doing all I would for him for other folks instead.... I still can share with Jesus the nicest of my toys by lending them

or giving them to poorer girls and boys.” (Joan G. Thomas, *If Jesus Came to My House*, Harper Collins Publishers)

Among all the preparations of this Advent season, let us put a priority on answering the cry from the wilderness: “PREPARE the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” We do this by our genuine repentance and by bearing fruit worthy of repentance. Let us do it to the glory of God!

AMEN.