

All Dressed Up
Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-11

How are your Christmas preparations coming? Lists and shopping and cards? We've dressed up the House of the Lord. Look all around and there are dressed-up store windows, street lights, homes and even cars – all dressed up for the Christmas Season. All around us Christmas preparations are evident. The tree on Main Street and the lights lining the buildings are beautiful against the night sky. Memorial UMC is constructing the sets for the drive-thru nativity and the star hangs from the Presbyterian parking lot to light the way for the Methodist scenes! All are dressing up for the celebration of Christ's birthday. However, how have you prepared for the season in a spiritual sense?

In traditional theological perspective, the main purposes of Advent are to 1) prepare for remembering (and re-experiencing) the birth of Jesus at Christmas, the first Advent, and 2) to prepare for the second coming of Jesus, the second Advent, or the Apocalypse, and 3) the final and complete manifestation of the Realm of God, the “Realm of Heaven”.

While Christians today have differing viewpoints on when, how, or whether the second Advent will occur, virtually all Christians believe that God is dissatisfied with the world in its present state and seeks to increase love, peace, justice, dignity, freedom, and abundance.

In Advent, the church thinks afresh about how to join God in the movement toward a world that is more like the realm of heaven. I can think of no better Advent guide than John the Baptist, whose instructions for preparation are condensed into one word: “Repent!”

In Matthew’s Gospel, John is an end-time prophet whose message is that the time has come to repent because the agent through whom God will affect the transformation from this age to the next is now revealed in Jesus.

A principal difference between John and Jesus is the timing of the movement towards the realm of Heaven. John sees the realm as future coming. Matthew portrays the realm as already partially manifest through Jesus, though becoming finally and fully manifest in the future (after the second coming). In Divinity school we called this tension the “already and not yet.” Repentance is the first step toward joining Jesus in the community moving toward the Realm of Heaven.

The root meaning of “to repent” is “to turn” or to have a dramatic change of mind and direction. To repent is turn away from the values and practices of the old age such as idolatry, violence, injustice, exploitation, slavery, and scarcity, and to turn toward the values and practices of the Realm of God characterized by peace, hope, love, mercy, reconciliation, justice, and salvation.

In this context, repentance includes being sorry for one’s personal sins, but it is much more. To repent is to take a clear-minded look at the ways in which one’s life colludes with the assumptions and behaviors of the old age, to turn away from complicity to the “way things

are" and to turn toward God and the attitudes and actions of the realm of heaven, the way things should be.

This text helps us reflect on where values and practices of the old age are expressed in the local community or the larger world, and also where we see qualities and values of the new world, the world that God is calling us to be a part of.

On this, the Second Sunday of Advent, we are called to disconnect from the old and move toward the new. We are called to repent, turnaround from the ways of this world and to move in this new direction as we seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.

Simply being discouraged with the way things are is not enough. As Christ-followers, we are called to do something. In this Season of Advent preparation, it is not enough to put a pretty dressing on everything, wrap beautiful packages and dangle ornaments from every branch of the tree.

Indeed, we do not have to live in a community where food insecurity is a norm. We can be the difference in providing food with no judgment attached, feeding because it is the right thing to do. We can be the voice crying out to legislators and representatives on behalf of those who have no voice. It is what John does. It is what Jesus would do.

We can make a difference by addressing the injustices in this world. As Christ-followers, we are called to address racial inequalities, economic oppression, and religious persecutions. Indeed, that is what we are called to do through our initiation into the Body of Christ, baptism into the Church.

John invites listeners to be immersed (baptized). Baptism is an occasion for confession of sin; that is naming and renouncing collaboration with the old age. Moreover, God uses water to initiate those who repent into a community awaiting the coming of the new age. That is you and that is me. We have been initiated into the Body of Christ and we are called to be the Body of Christ in the world.

Where John baptizes with water, Jesus will do so "with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matthew 3:10). The reference to the Holy Spirit assures the community that the eschatological Spirit that fills Jesus at immersion (Matthew 3:13-17) will also fill the disciples, whom Matthew explicitly calls "the church".

As the Church, we must speak out. We must not settle for the status quo. Through our belief in Jesus Christ, our baptism by fire and the Spirit, we **MUST** turn from the ways of the world and seek the new world order of Jesus Christ.

There was no pretty wrapping on John the Baptist. He didn't fool around. He lived in the wilderness around the Dead Sea. He subsisted on a starvation diet, and so did his disciples. He wore clothes that even the rummage-sale people wouldn't have handled. When he preached, it was fire and brimstone every time.

I invite you to consider this scene from the movie, *Godspell*.

Instead of dressing up, upon hearing the instruction to "Prepare the Way of the Lord," these folks strip off their shoes, coats, sweaters, all the things that inhibit them as they run to the waters, splashing, laughing, dancing, with joy as the Spirit moves them.

God is calling them to a new life. God is calling them to leave the usual and the ordinary, turning to a new life, a life of freedom, a life of responsibility, a life of commitment, a life of joy.

The message of Advent presents us with a momentous decision: whether we will align our lives with what God is doing in our world. If our allegiance is with the coming of God's justice and peace in this world, that choice entails choosing not to continue pursuing the selfish ways of this broken world, even when it's running around pretending to be Christian by celebrating 'Christmas.'

Put negatively, there are no favorites: everyone must be immersed in the waters; everyone must join the transformation. Turned into positive terms, this also means: no one is to be written off as inferior or worthless. Every person matters to God.

Today I invite you to cast off the tethers to the world and the "way things are" as you renew and refresh your commitment to work for Christ and the Realm of God that is to come. As we sing the next hymn, I invite you to come to the waters, feel them, be refreshed by them and receive the Spirit of God. Amen.