Are We Ready For Jesus to Come?  
Matthew 3:1-3 

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 2 2007 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church  

Now in those days John the Baptist makes his appearance, preaching away in the desert of Judea, and saying, “Turn your lives around! Because here comes the kingdom of heaven!” This is the very person spoken of by Isaiah the prophet where he is saying, “A voice is howling out in the desert, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths!’” (Matthew 3:1-3) 

In some ways, Christmas is like our presidential elections. Every go around it seems like we start getting ready earlier and earlier.  

This year my wife did some of our Christmas shopping in July. Can anybody here beat that? And I’m pretty sure I saw Christmas decorations for sale down the street at Ace Hardware before Halloween was over. It was a little disconcerting to see the pumpkins intermingling with the reindeer! 

Understand, however, that this is not a new thing. Ever since the very first Christmas, people have been getting ready for Jesus’ coming way before he actually arrives. In fact, Old Testament prophets like Isaiah and Daniel starting telling the people to get ready for the coming Messiah hundreds of years before Mary and Joseph showed up on the scene. Imagine these guys’ message, “There’s only 21,000 shopping days left until Jesus comes!” 

Even after Jesus was born, they still kept preparing for his coming. We just heard John the Baptist crying out to the people of his day that they had better get ready to welcome Jesus. 

And when he finally did come, Jesus did on earth exactly what the prophets said that he would do. He was filled with the power of God. He healed the sick. He helped the blind see. He made the crippled run. He cast out demons. Eventually, he was crucified. The world killed him. And then, three days later, God raised him from the dead. All just as the prophets had said. 

And on top of that, while he was here, Jesus made clear that even after he was resurrected and taken back into heaven, his followers on this earth should still continue to prepare for his coming. Because, he promised, he was going to come again. One day, he told us, he will come back again to judge the world. And he said that at that time those who have believed in Christ will enter into eternal paradise. And those who have told God for their whole lives that they really don’t want anything to do with Jesus, well, they will finally be allowed to have what they have always wanted. 

So even now, we are preparing for Jesus’ coming. For, you see, the season of Advent is not just about looking back to the time when Jesus came at Christmas. It is also, maybe even more so, about looking forward to the day when Jesus will come again at the end of time. And so whether it’s July or October or December, we’re always supposed to be getting ready for Jesus’ arrival. 

But how, exactly, do we do that? How do we prepare ourselves for Christ to come? 

Well, this is the way John the Baptist puts it. Again, he says, “Turn your lives around! Because here comes the kingdom of heaven! Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths!” 

You know, decorating the tree, and hanging the stockings, and baking cookies, and finishing the shopping – these are ways a lot of us get ready for Christmas. And those are all good things to do. But John says here that the best way to prepare for the coming of Jesus is to turn your life around, to make the crooked parts of your life straight again.
Well, what’s he mean by that?

Well, the word John uses here for “turning around” is from the Greek word *metanoia*, a word which usually gets translated as “repentance.” And literally, to repent means to have a change of heart, or a change of mind, or to experience some sort of emotional regret about your life. It’s that place you might get to where you realize you wish things were different than they actually are and you wish you could go back.¹ That’s repentance.

Think about it this way.

Imagine a little boy who has gone to the mall with his mom to do some Christmas shopping. And as they walk in to this enormous department store, this young mom bends down and says to her son, “Listen, I need you to stay right with me today. There are a ton of people here and it would be very easy to get lost. So don’t wander off. Do you understand?” And out of habit, the little boy nods his head in agreement.

Well, of course, a few minutes later, as the woman is distracted in a conversation with the sales clerk, the little boy sees something across the store that captures his imagination. And he’s got to have a closer look. And being 6 years old he understands, “Hey, I’m old enough to just wander over there on my own, check things out, and then find my way back.” So that’s exactly what he does.

And you know what happens. In a few minutes, the boy looks up again to check his bearings, and everything suddenly looks different. There are people, and colors, and displays everywhere. Nothing looks familiar. His mom is nowhere to be seen. No face looks friendly. He has no idea which direction he came from. And less idea which way he should go now. He’s lost.

So what does he do? Well, he repents. He has a change of heart as he realizes, with regret, that he does not like where it is he finds himself and that he wants to be back where he is supposed to be. And so he throws his hands up in the air, and he begins, in desperation, to cry out for his mom. All he wants, at this point, is to find his way back. Nothing else matters.

That’s repentance.

(This whole time, by the way, his mother has never taken her eyes off the son she knows likes to wander. She knows exactly where he is. And as soon as she sees him cry out, as soon as she sees him repent, she makes her way over to him and puts things back the way they are supposed to be.)

You see, John is simply saying to us that the best way to prepare for the coming of Jesus into our world is to take an honest account of our lives and admit to ourselves that we have lost our way from God in this confused world. Then we are to turn our lives around towards God, reach our hands to heaven, and cry for God’s help. And God, who has never for an instant taken his eyes off us, promises to come near to us and meet us with mercy, and grace, and love. And he will lead us back to where it is we belong.

Now, maybe you are a person who has been so distracted in life that you’ve let go of God’s hand and wandered off into the world on your own. And maybe you have looked up and realized that things aren’t so familiar anymore, that you are not at the place where you know you should be, not at the place where you want to be. But you don’t know the way back. And so all you can do is turn to God. To cry out for help. To throw your hands up to heaven.

This morning, if nothing else, I would love for you to see this upcoming Christmas season as an opportunity. An opportunity to see that the Kingdom of God is on its way. An opportunity to see that Jesus is, indeed, nearer today then he was yesterday – and that one day, sooner or later, you and I will find ourselves standing before Jesus. And this season is an opportunity to prepare our lives to meet Christ, to turn our lives towards him and receive his grace and love.

If that is to happen this Christmas, most of us, frankly, are going to have to do things differently this season. Because if we don’t, I’ll tell you what will happen. You know as well as me. You’ll run around buying all sorts of things for people who really don’t need them in the first place. Along the way you’ll rack up credit card bills which you really don’t need. And you’ll cook, and bake, and prepare for feasts and banquets and parties. You’ll decorate to the point of exhaustion. You’ll pack your calendar with social engagements, special holiday programs, and family traditions which just can’t be missed. And much of it – don’t get me wrong, I’m no Scrooge! – much of it will be a great deal of fun. Christmas can be a really, really good time.

Yet, in the end, the danger is that once again we will have spent this season preparing for the coming of Christmas, and missed yet another opportunity to prepare for the coming of Jesus. And when January rolls around, we may have had a wonderful time, but we really won’t be much different than we were before the season started. Because, you know, Christmas really doesn’t change people. Only Jesus changes people. Christmas doesn’t really help people find their way home in life. Only Jesus does that.

And so, if what I’m saying resonates with you – if you relate to that little boy in the department store who wishes he hadn’t wandered away and is ready to come back home – here’s what I’d do this season. Two things. One, I’d make it a priority to come and be with this community in the times we have set aside for worship in the coming weeks. Come and consider with us what it really means to prepare our lives to welcome Jesus. All of us are in the same boat on this. So, of all the things on your December calendar, make those Wednesday and Sunday times of worship in this community a high, high priority.

Second, I would highly encourage you to find some time each day this month to just stop and be still before God. Find 15 minutes, more if you can, to go off on your own. Find a quiet corner of your house early in the morning, or late at night. Light a candle if it helps. Bring along a cup of coffee or tea – Starbucks Christmas Blend. And when you sit down, take a deep breath and tell God, “Lord, I need you to show me what you want me to do to prepare my life before you come.”

Then open your Bible (if you need one, ask us and we’ll give you one). Read the passages we suggest in the Next Step. Read through one of the four Gospels, a section at a time. Use the Advent devotion we’re offering. And just read God’s Word and keep asking that question: “Lord, what do you want me to do to prepare my life before you come?”

And then, just listen. And keep listening. And pay attention to what you notice. And if it helps, write down what you hear.

I’m sure there are other ways, but these two suggestions might be a place to begin.

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Jesus is coming into the world. The kingdom of heaven, we’re told, has come, and is coming. And this is, by the way, extraordinary good news for those who trust in Christ.

So this Christmas season, let’s go ahead and get the place all decked out for the party. Let’s just make sure that in all the commotion, we don’t once again miss the guest of honor. For again, Christmas doesn’t change people. Only Jesus changes people. And Christmas doesn’t lead people back home. Only Jesus can do that.

Amen.

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**The Next Step**

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

-Many people look forward to, and really enjoy, the season of Christmas. Some do not. How about you? Is this a season you enjoy? Why or why not? (What’s your favorite part of Christmas? The part you could do without?)
-Here’s a question which perhaps you have never really considered. What is the point of Christmas? When it’s all said and done, what do you and your family really hope to accomplish or see happen at Christmas? Asked another way, what is a successful Christmas?

-In preparing us to meet Jesus when he comes, John the Baptist declares to the world, “Turn your lives around! Here comes the Kingdom of Heaven. Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.” What do you think he means by all that? What sorts of people in your life have been like John the Baptist, people who have been helping you to prepare to meet Jesus?

-Be honest. Do you anticipate that this Christmas season, though filled with lots of activity and celebration, will still leave your life, come January, pretty much the same as it is now? Or, are you hopeful that somehow you will be substantively changed in the midst of this season?

-What did you think of the story Jeff told about the little boy lost in the mall? Do you, personally, resonate with that story in any way?

-Imagine you were to intentionally set aside time this season to honestly and expectantly ask God, over and over again, “Lord, what do you want me to do to prepare my life before you come?” Do you have any idea of what sort of answer(s) you might receive?

-Now is the time to decide if things are going to be different this time around. Specifically, what do you plan to do this Christmas to prepare your life to welcome Jesus?