

Preparation for the Kingdom

Matthew 3:1-12

Sunday, December 4, 2022 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

- Intro: John the Baptist Prepares the Way

One of the highest, dearest goals for a Christian is to grow spiritually, to learn more, to engage God in prayer on a deeper level, to become more like the Savior whose Name we claim. We want to grow in our awareness that there is a Kingdom of God that is yet to come, yes, but also is in the here and now, that we serve a God who is everywhere at all times and is as near to us as our breath, even nearer. Advent is the season of anticipated arrivals. There was the birth of Jesus, in such humble circumstances so long ago, and there is the prophesied return of the same in power and glory. This passage in Matthew, I believe, is here because there is also the anticipation of the Kingdom drawing near to us in the present, and we need to be prepared for times when God is doing something new, or something that causes us to progress in our development as Christians. Let's read through and consider this passage.

- Repent

1In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 2and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" 3For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying:

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord;

Make His paths straight.'" (Isaiah 40:3)

In ancient times, and in modern times as well, there are areas of a country without a developed road system. There may be trails, but they are not direct, not paved and no bridges exist. If the citizens of that region learn that their monarch wants to visit them, they will set to work repairing or preparing roads so the king can reach them easily. Isaiah in a prophecy written before the fall of Jerusalem centuries before, wrote of the people preparing the route for God to set them free from the 70 years of slavery that was about to begin. The same image is brought forth again with John the Baptist. Your God is planning to come for you. Are you ready? As we begin the Church year with Advent, we anticipate that Holy Spirit doing something new in our lives, so we are wise to ask ourselves, are we ready?

4Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

5Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him

6and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

7But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

- Fruit Worthy of Repentance

8Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, 9and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.

10And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

A major theme in the New Testament is that we are like branches of a great vine (cf. John 15) and it is natural for us to bear fruit. In fact, it is imperative. Fruit, or good works, does not provide salvation but it does demonstrate it and we do well to consider ourselves and ask for examples of good fruit and whether we have some. Now in Matthew, John the Baptist speaks to the religious leaders. In Luke, he addresses the crowd. In Luke (3:7-9) he also gives examples of good fruit. The examples include giving one tunic away if you have two, tax collectors collecting only what is appropriate, soldiers not intimidating anyone or making false accusations, and being content with their wages. Looking at other passages, I would suggest that years of earnest prayer and the answers to them qualify as fruit. According to Isaiah 11, characteristics of the Holy Spirit that develop in the person, such as wisdom, qualify as fruit. Character development, such as the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 qualify as fruit. Don't try to discern your fruit, ask the Holy Spirit to reveal where you are and where you can be.

- The Holy Spirit and Fire

11I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Finally, this passage reveals the sobering nature of the process. John prophesies that the Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. There is a single definite article. It is not “baptize with the Holy Spirit and with the fire” as if they are two different processes. They are one. With the Holy Spirit there is much gain-in reverence (that is first), in knowledge, in wisdom, in compassion and love, but there is also the removal of old dreams and hopes that aren't part of God's plan for you, and certainly sinful habits and character flaws. The “fire” symbolizes purification, so we need to be willing to let the Holy Spirit take away as well as add to our lives. The other understanding of this passage is the truly sobering part. The image of wheat and chaff is found elsewhere in the Gospels, in which Jesus says that people who have rejected the Gospel are like chaff and sent to the fires of Hell. Of all people whose words are recorded in Scripture, the person who spoke of Hell the most was the Lord Jesus Himself.

Advent is a season of waiting and of preparation. We symbolically and vicariously walk through the days leading up to the birth of Jesus, and that is why this passage is part of the tradition. We anticipate and prepare as well for the return of Christ and also in anticipation of the ongoing work of the Spirit in our lives. We ask the Spirit to reveal where we are at, and where we are going, what will be gained and what need be removed in order to grow. The kingdom for which we prepare is not just and once and future kingdom, it is now.