

“Are You Ready for Christmas”

Mark 1:1-8

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
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How many times have you been asked, “Are you ready for Christmas?” I have a standard reply. “I am not now but I will be.” Actually, there is a lot more confidence in my voice than in my heart.

There is a lot to do to get ready for Christmas. The tree has to be put up and the decorations put out. Presents must be purchased and wrapped. Children’s costumes have to be altered for the church Christmas play. The house needs to be cleaned and food cooked for guests.

Getting ready for Christmas is not done easily or quickly, that’s for sure. It can be a demanding and stressful time.

Last Wednesday evening, one of our members with two young children passed me in the hall and said, “I know Christmas must be near because I am saying ‘hurry up’ thirty to forty times a day.”

I don’t want to add more stress to your life, but when you finish all your chores, you are still not ready for Christmas. You may be ready for the holidays, but not Christmas.

Preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus has a spiritual component to it. If this is overlooked or ignored, you are going to feel very empty on Christmas Day. After the gifts are unwrapped, the food is eaten and the decorations are packed away for another year, you are going to wonder what this season was really all about.

I don’t want this to happen to you or me. What, then, must we do in the days ahead to prepare for the celebration of Christ’s birth so that we do not feel empty and drained on Christmas Day, but filled with His gracious Spirit and ready to resume our common journey refreshed and renewed.

I believe our text has some suggestions for us. While not a traditional Christmas passage drawn from the birth narratives, it is nonetheless an Advent text filled with some wise advice from the last Old Testament prophet, John the Baptizer. What would that be? **The Lord comes to people that prepare for Him.** This is a message we need to hear as we are planning our busy schedules in the days ahead. We need to be reminded that it is possible to leave Christ out of Christmas.

What must we do to prevent this from happening? How do we prepare spiritually for Christmas? **Taking our cue from John the Baptist, it requires that we feed our spirits, share our faith and help those that are struggling along our journey.**

As ironic as this may sound, I’m not sure we face a more challenging time to nourish our spirits than Advent. This is because in our culture, December is the busiest time of the year for many people. There are not enough hours in the day to do all that needs to be done. Most of us burn the candle at both ends and still leave things undone on our to-do list. Rarely do we have the luxury during Advent of laying some responsibilities aside. We merely add more to them.

What suffers when we do this? Our spirits do. We simply do not have enough time to attend to the needs of our spirits when so many other demands are thrust upon us.

We must, however, be disciplined enough to carve out time to nourish our spirits by finding a quiet place to read, ponder, reflect, meditate and pray. I know this is not easy, but it is necessary if we are to prepare our hearts for the celebration of Christ’s birth. Too much is at stake if we don’t.

The central character in our text is John the Baptist. To call him interesting is an understatement. For those of you who saw the 1971 musical, “Godspell,” you recall how John was characterized. In this modern retelling of the good news about Jesus, John appeared on stage dressed like a circus ringmaster. His job was to get the show going and he did. “Prepare ye the way of the Lord,” he sang over and over to a haunting melody.

John was sent by God to get the people ready for Jesus. He was not the Messiah and knew it. He knew, however, that someone needed to prepare the people for Jesus’ arrival.

So how did he do this? Did he go to Jerusalem and preach in the temple, the hub of all religious activity in Palestine? No, he stayed in the desert and preached to those that left the city to come and hear him. **Why?**

This was where he lived and was comfortable. He was a Bedouin that lived a very simple lifestyle. Chances are, had he gone to the temple, he would have been ignored. The noise and pace of the city would have drowned out his message. People would have been too busy or unimpressed to listen. His would have been one voice among many, merely a nuisance.

Therefore, John stayed in the desert and drew people out of the city to hear him. Their cell phones and Blackberries would not work in the wilderness. There would be no marketplace or vendors vying for their attention. The desert was the place where they could disconnect from that hectic life and hear a word from the Lord. So John drew them out to this place of reflection, retreat, renewal and restoration.

I'm not surprised. Throughout history, God's people returned to the wilderness to get back in touch with Him. When they lost their way or their spirits were depleted, the wilderness is where they headed. When they wanted to know where God was at work in the world, they retreated to the desert to think and pray. The Exodus was repeated many times in the lives of the ancient Israelites and this appeared to be another one.

When they went to the desert, what did they hear? They heard a prophet in the tradition of Elijah call them to confession and repentance. He told them that they needed to get serious about their faith and remove the barriers from their lives that would keep them from hearing Jesus' message and following him. Cleansing their soul, symbolized by baptism, would prepare their hearts and make them receptive to his ministry. They would be ready to receive him after examining and purifying their lives.

I believe this is true for us, too. Christmas will mean so much more to us if we pull aside everyday to feed our spirits through study, prayer, reflection and meditation. I strongly encourage you to do it. In addition to going to the mall, parties, relatives' homes and even church, go to the wilderness. Find that place of seclusion where you can commune with God and replenish your spirit, that place where Christ can be born in you again and again and again.

Advent invites us back into the wilderness. I hope you will respond to that invitation.

I also believe that sharing your faith will feed your spirit as you prepare for Christmas. "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness," is how Mark described John. John shared his faith with those that came to the desert to hear him. One far greater than he was coming and they did not want to miss him. His life would change theirs forever.

John is a good role model for us during this holy season. Our faith needs to be shared with those around us, too. Never underestimate the impact that one voice can have. John's was a lone voice crying in the wilderness, but it was powerful and influential. Sometimes one voice is enough. Let it be yours.

There is one other thing you can do during Advent to prepare for Christmas. Help those that are struggling along their journey so that they will have a reason to celebrate, too.

In ancient days when an Oriental king planned a visit to a distant part of his kingdom, he sent a messenger ahead to announce the coming visit. The messenger's job was to tell the citizens to prepare for the king's visit.

In those days, roads were often in poor condition. The people were expected to repair the roads so that the king's ride would be smooth and comfortable. As a result, roads were straightened, hills were cut down and obstacles were removed. In all likelihood, this is what Isaiah had in mind when he wrote his words of comfort and hope.

I wonder how many around us will not make the journey to Bethlehem this year because the road they are traveling is impassable. It is filled with rocks, debris and insurmountable hills.

In light of this, what do you think John would say to us this morning? I believe he would tell us to be the one to pull up the rocks, clear out the debris and give them a push. It is not just enough for us to make it to the celebration on Christmas Day. We need to bring others with us.

Are you ready for Christmas? I suppose it depends upon whether you want to enjoy the holidays or celebrate Christ's birth. I hope you will do both.

