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Prepare the Way

Matthew 3:1 – 12

Alek and I got married when we were just shy of 30 years old. We didn't feel particularly "old," but we quickly realized that marriage would be quite an adjustment. We had lived many years with the rhythms of our individual lives, our separate friendships, our differing levels of cleanliness, spending habits, sizes of beds, and identities.

For Alek, the changes of marriage were more quickly embraced, but for *me*, these changes were an unwelcome intrusion. I didn't *want* my rhythms to change. I didn't *want* to have to check in with someone before making a purchase. I didn't *want* my identity to change. I had become prideful of my identity as a strong single person. And now, I was just a "regular old married woman."

These thoughts and feelings surprised me, because I had wanted to be married for *years*. I had wanted to share a life with someone, to have a family with someone, to grow old with someone. But I had not fully considered what would need to change in my life to accommodate a husband.

For the first few months, my life patterns hardly changed. I wondered if Alek noticed.

One day, Alek looked at me seriously, and asked when I was going to take *him* on a coffee date. He told me that I had gotten together with *many* friends for coffee dates, but that I had not gone on a coffee date with *him*. He wondered when I was going to begin prioritizing him.

I was dumbfounded and convicted. He *had* noticed, and was kindly naming the very thing I knew I wasn't giving him. I wasn't giving him a place of priority in my life. It was true, and he was right. I *wasn't* prioritizing him, and somehow, my priorities would *need* to change.

With *every* important relationship, priorities *must* change. Priorities must change to show the importance of that relationship. Priorities must change when we get married, have children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, develop a friendship, join a community, and develop a relationship with Jesus.

This is the call of Advent. It is a call to take inventory and to reprioritize. What *are* our priorities? What is receiving our time, attention, and financial resources? What would our family, close friends, or Grow Group say about our priorities? Are our priorities what they ought to be?

Let's get into Scripture. In Matthew 3, we meet John the Baptist, an eccentric person with a heavy message. Frankly, John seems like a complete "Debi Downer," someone *much* too serious right before Christmas. He seems like he is *intentionally* trying to ruin our fun. But the ironic thing is that John has quite the following. Matthew says that people from Jerusalem and all Judea and the land around the Jordan are coming out to John (Matt 3:5). They are hearing his message calling them to repent, and are being baptized by him in droves.

John's baptism is an *unusual* baptism. Normally, baptisms are reserved for new conversions into a religion, but John's baptism is for those who are already Jews and are seeking to repent, to turn their lives around. He is calling for them to

turn from their sinful ways and to be obedient to God. His baptism is an outward sign of an inward change of direction.

John is *clearly* convinced that he has a unique purpose. He believes he is one prophesied about in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, a prophecy was given concerning Elijah the prophet, who would come before the great and terrible day of the LORD. He would turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the children to their fathers. If he *didn't* turn their hearts, God would destroy the land, Malachi 4:5 – 6. In other words, an Elijah would come who would cause the people to repent, and if the people *didn't* repent, the land would be destroyed.

This is a serious task before a serious day, and John is up to the task. He wants *no* one to be confused; he *is* the coming Elijah who will lead the people to repentance. And so he dresses just as Elijah dressed, in clothes made of animal hair and a leather belt around his waste (2 Ki 1:8).

John calls the people to repent, to change directions, for the kingdom of heaven is here! The time has come to turn from sin and to prepare the way for God's coming. God is King, and He *is* coming, *soon*. It is time to prepare the way for His arrival, before He destroys the land.

John called the people to repent, to ready their hearts for God's coming. He anticipated impending destruction, but God's coming at that time in history was different.

Scripture tells us that God took on human flesh and came down as a vulnerable baby. He became fully human, and he was fully God. His name was Jesus. He humbled himself by becoming human, and was obedient to God the Father,

obedient even to death on a cross. He did not come into the world to *destroy* the world, but to *save* the world. In God's great love for the world, God "*gave* His only Son, that whoever believes in him should *not* perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to *condemn* the world, but in order that the world might be *saved* through him" (Jn 3:16 – 17).

The Day of Judgment would one day come, but it would not be in John's lifetime. The world is still waiting for that final day, that day when Jesus will return to earth and will separate the sheep from the goats, those who believe in and follow Jesus, from those who don't.

Frankly, preaching about judgment is *not* something that I enjoy. I am not a fire and brimstone preacher, who enjoys getting the congregation riled up and motivated to participate in the church out of fear of judgment.

But, I am remiss if I do not speak the truth to you. Each one of us, *will* experience a time of judgment, and it will not be based on how nice we were or how many charitable organizations we financially supported. And it *won't* be based on the bumper sticker that says, "He who dies with the most toys, wins."

Our salvation will simply be based on our belief in Jesus. Nothing more, nothing less. That belief will take root, and will grow into action. Our lives will begin to look like Jesus', who humbled himself in obedience to his Father, who gave *everything*, even his own life, to be obedient to the Father. He loved all people, and risked his reputation so that *all people* would know the love and salvation of God. He critiqued systems of oppression, and received the love of the most hated in society.

He was and is the very image of God, and is through whom we understand the Father.

As we prepare for Jesus' coming this Advent season, we hear the call – the call not to live in fear – but the call to repent, to change directions, to reprioritize, to reorient our lives around the One who is our Creator and Redeemer.

A long time ago, perhaps as long ago as the early church, an unknown writer composed seven prayers for Advent, sung between the leader and the congregation. These prayers were called the “O Antiphons.” They were called the “O Antiphons,” because each prayer began with “O,” and they were sung antiphonally – back and forth between the leader and congregation. They were sung the seven days leading to Christmas, and were the source of the hymn “Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel.”

On the twenty-first of December, the darkest day of the year, the prayer “O Oriens” was sung. On this darkest day, this winter equinox, the prayer to the “oriens,” the “dayspring,” was sung. (We find this prayer in verse four of “Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel.”) “O Dayspring, splendor of light eternal and sun of righteousness: Come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.”¹

On the darkest day of the year, the Church remembers that One has come, and will come, the light of the world, the “day,” and the living water, the “spring.” He is our renewal and our source. He is the origin of light, water, and all of creation. As poet-priest Malcolm Guite wrote, “The Christian life is a reorientation, a turning eastwards and upstream, towards the source of life and light that is always flowing

¹ Malcolm Guite, *Waiting on the Word*, 79.

towards us.”² *A reorientation, a turning eastwards and upstream, towards the source of life and light that is always flowing towards us.*

Wherever you are now, you are being called to reorient, to turn, to reprioritize. As is necessary for *every* important relationship in life, a reprioritization is *necessary* for those following in the footsteps of Jesus. You and I *cannot* continue in the way in which we began this journey, this Advent-ture. Our priorities will *need* to change. With Jesus as our orientation, our priority, other priorities will need to shift.

Often, our priorities are unintentional and seem to be happenstance. We don't *try* to prioritize ourselves, but when we look at our bank accounts, we recognize that the majority of what has come in has been spent on us. The time we spend with others is often to give ourselves self-assurance that we are likeable, we are friendly, and ought to be thought of well. The time we are at home is often in front of the tv and not serving our family or considering others. The time we are with Jesus is rare, and the amount of time we serve his desires – we can't even count.

Reorienting and reprioritizing our lives is *not* easy, but it *is* necessary. I encourage you to take a look at a typical week. How is your time spent? Take a look at your finances. How is money spent? Invite your spouse, a good friend, or your Grow Group to speak into how you spend your time and finances, and make a plan.

² Guite, 82.

This Advent, may we be an intentional people, a people who are oriented toward Jesus and have *him* as our priority. May we be a people ready for Jesus' return, a people who follow in his footsteps.

“Come, Thou long expected Jesus...
Born a child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By Thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all sufficient merit,
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.”³

³ https://hymnary.org/text/come_thou_long_expected_jesus_born_to