**Advent 2 22 Matt 3 Your King is Coming** reused 2016

Grace mercy and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Seated

The sermon is titled “Your King is Coming.” Our text is the gospel lesson. We will look at it in the sermon.

One fall when Jon and I were hunting it was very difficult to see very far because a big late spring wet snowfall had caused a great many young trees to bend over under the weight and they remained bent over the cut lines wherever we went. Once as we came back onto the cutline after going around one of these blockages we saw 2 elk down the line disappear out of view. We snuck that way quietly and found they had crossed on another cut line, and we could see them down the line, but trees prevented a shot. We scurried their way as quietly as we could and when we got to the other side of the blocking trees we saw an elk rump disappear down into a creek bed. When we got to the creek bed all was quiet. The cut line on the other side was all overgrown and unpassable. Jon blew on his hoochi mama making a calf elk sound and the whole of the bush on the opposite side of the creek came alive with elk mews. And a cow and calf elk appeared right in from of us. We harvested them and cleaned them out to cool them down. As any hunter knows once your animal is down then the real work starts. As we walked back to camp to get our quads and the quad tub we started to wonder just what we had done. There were a great many places where the quads would not pass all the bent over trees, and the normal number of bigger fallen trees that would have to be cut out to get the animals out. Well we had some help back at camp, and many hours later and after more than a few gas fill ups on the chain saw we had prepared a way out for our animals. The ride out was smooth thanks to the preparations. And preparing the way paid double dividends as we harvested another elk in that same area three days later. …. Preparing the way was the ministry given to John the Baptist.

Preparing the path of Christ—preparing the way of the Lord—is Old Testament imagery from Isaiah that our Gospel in Matthew uses to describe the prophetic and baptismal ministry of John the Baptist. John’s prophetic message was that the Lord was coming in grace and judgment, so it was time for the people of Judea and Galilee to prepare. Due to the sinful rebellion and idolatry of God’s people, it was almost as if God’s path to return to his people had become a dangerous wilderness of rough terrain worse than our path back to our elk! It was John’s purpose to get the people ready for that coming so that the Christ would not find a blocked path in the wilderness where his people were to be, but rather a people waiting in eager expectation for his arrival to deliver them from sin. John was there to prepare the way for Christ.

If John the Baptist thought the spiritual condition of first-century Israel was challenging, imagine what he’d think if he were preaching in the spiritual wilderness of twenty-first-century Canada. We have the whole menu of false religions from Islam to Mormons, a huge segment of the population practices no religion, and a significant portion of Christian churches deny central tenets of the faith such as justification by faith alone and the resurrection of the body. It is specifically because of these challenges that this account of John the Baptist continues to contain an important message for the Church today. As we look at this text again this Advent season, we the Church continue John the Baptist’s important work in Advent to prepare the way for Christ today and for when he returns again at the end of the age.

This text focuses on three important aspects to preparing Christ’s way that are still very applicable to our lives and the Church today. Let’s look at our text again before we examine it for these three aspects of preparing Christ’s way.

**Matthew 3:1–12** In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

“A voice of one calling in the desert,

‘Prepare the way for the Lord,

make straight paths for him.'”

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” Here ends our text.

First, the central word in John the Baptist’s preaching that prepared Christ’s path was **repent.** Just as Lent is a season of preparation and spiritual refreshment for Christians, so also is Advent. It is a time to quit kidding ourselves about how good and holy we’re becoming, honestly recognize our sins—in thought, word, and deed—and repent. John the Baptist did not sugarcoat his condemnation of sinners. As did the prophets of ancient Israel, he told people to straighten up the deep problems they were in without the grace of God. **Repent**does not mean just being contrite or sorry for our sins, but it also encompasses faith, believing in God’s grace to forgive sins for the sake of Christ’s saving work. Without the Holy Spirit working the miracle of faith, contrition for sin is a dead end. With his mention of the kingdom of the heavens, John is pointing his hearers to God’s gracious work in Jesus to bring God’s reign back to this sinful earth. Just as John called people of old to repent, Advent is a special time for us Christians to repent and to call the unbelieving world all around us to repent.

Three simple words that most people, including many Christians, find difficult to say are “I am sorry.” When we transgress against God or someone else, we would rather yell, scream, and argue than tell God or that person, “I am sorry.” Evidence of repentance, of faith worked by the Holy Spirit, which we see in our Gospel, is when the people coming to John to be baptized confessed their sins. Advent is a time for **us** to be honest with God and one another by confessing our wrongs, our sin. ,,,, We all desire the finer things in life. When does that desire for a new car or quad or boat turn into coveting? We tell white lies thinking that it is OK in the circumstances, but it is of course not. Then there is **my** great nemesis – when are we truly in need of food and when is it gluttony? We all sin in thought word and deed each day. We may think we only sin in small ways, but Paul tells us how we should think of ourselves. Read:

**1 Timothy 1: 15** Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom **I am the worst**.

And if we are arrogant enough to think we do not sin we are deceiving ourselves. Read:

**1 John 1: 8** If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

As Christians we are aware that if we confess our sins God is sure to forgive us. Confession of sin is the rhythm of life for a Christian. Advent is a time to make sure that we are back in that rhythm of confessing our sins to God and one another.

So the first concept was to repent. The second aspect to preparing Christ’s path that’s revealed in our Gospel is to live in your baptismal grace. Jews did many ritual washings seeking purity from their sins. For example, some of the remains uncovered at Qumran, near the region where John baptized, include *mikvahs*, or washing pools with steps where you could walk down into the water for ritual cleansing. John’s Baptism was different; it was a **one-time** washing that brought forgiveness. It was a one-time sharing of God’s forgiveness in a very tangible way. Just as people were plunged under the water, they were washed of their sin through Baptism. It was a Baptism that laid the foundation for the Christian Baptism you’ve received.

We continue to prepare the way for Christ in this Advent season as we live in and treasure our baptismal grace, which is the undeserved favor of God we have through our baptism. John the Baptist said in our text, “after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry”. As amazing as John the Baptist was with his preaching and Baptism, you have received the very preaching and Baptism of **Jesus**. When **you** were baptized, you received the Holy Spirit, who united you with all the saving work of Christ: his entire obedient life, his death as a payment for sin, and his resurrection victory! You did not deserve all this, but because of the grace of God, the undeserved favor of God, these free gifts were received as a integral part of your baptism. Therefore, an important aspect of preparing Christ’s path is simply living in this baptismal grace, claiming and treasuring it, living in its power and peace. Advent is a time to get back to the spiritual basics, and Baptism is one of those spiritual foundations in our lives.

Our Gospel reveals a third aspect to preparing Christ’s path. John said in our text, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance!” This command sounds rather challenging. John even goes on with a strong word of judgment: “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that **does not** produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire”. If we are sinners, and we all are, then how can poor **trees** like us produce good fruit? The Holy Spirit works repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, so it is not us who will produce good fruit, but the Holy Spirit whom we have received abundantly in Baptism when we were united with Christ. The fruit we cannot produce by nature—such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—the Holy Spirit can and **will** produce in and through us as we participate in our sanctification by making use of the Means of Grace, that is God’s word, read and studied, and the sacrament of communion. We prepare Christ’s path by bearing the fruit of faith for the world to see, fruit miraculously produced not by us, but by the Holy Spirit who is within us as our nature is transformed through sanctification. …. Sanctification means to make holy. While we participate with God as a junior partner in being made holy, it is Christ’s death that makes it possible. Read:

**Hebrews 13: 12** And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.

For Christians everything goes back to the cross, including our sanctification. Then as our lives are transformed by God as we participate in the means of grace, through this life long process, **we** can exhibit our transformed lives to those around us. We do that when we forgive others, when we are kind to those who may not be kind themselves, when we help out a stranger in trouble on the highway, bring a gift to the food bank, are joyful even when circumstances may not make that seem the appropriate response, when we are patient when circumstances are frustrating, and in very many other ways. And we are not motivated to do these things because that is what Christians are expected or commanded to do, but rather because they become our new nature. We do them naturally as our lives are transformed through sanctification and we display less and less of the works of the flesh and more and more of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

… John the Baptist must have been overwhelmed with his task—so much to do to prepare Galilee and Judea for Christ’s coming. **We** may feel overwhelmed with our mission. But it all starts within each of us by repenting and confessing our sins, living in our baptismal grace, and bearing the fruit of repentance worked by the Holy Spirit as we set the course of our life on being more and more Christ like through sanctification. The path to our hearts is then wide open. We, in turn, want others to experience the undeserved love of God in Christ that we already have in these holy days of Advent. As they see the fruit of the Spirit exhibited in our lives it becomes easy to call them to repent and confess their sins, to be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit, and then in turn to bear the fruit of repentance the Holy Spirit produces. The task of John the Baptist was to prepare the way for Christ. That is also **our** Advent task today, to prepare the way for Christ—to our hearts **and** to the hearts of others.

Amen

May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard you hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.