

“Make Straight the Way for Jesus through Repentance”

During the 4-week church season of Advent, which we are currently in, two of those weeks feature Scripture lessons focused on the ministry of a man named John the Baptist. The children just spoke to us about one of the signs of Christmas. The fact that the ancient Christian periscopes, which suggest weekly readings for Christians to focus on in worship, have two weeks devoted to the ministry of John the Baptist seems to be a sign that we should think about the message that God is trying to convey to us through John the Baptist as we prepare for Christmas and Judgment Day. Give your attention to John 1:6-9, 19-28.

⁶ There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹ The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world...

¹⁹ Now this was John’s testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Christ.” ²¹ They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.” ²² Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”

²⁴ Now some Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ questioned him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” ²⁶ “I baptize with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” ²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

We could talk here today about John’s taste in clothing (camel’s hair suits) or his unique diet (locusts and wild honey). And we could get into a discussion about whether John’s baptism was different or the same in comparison to the baptism that Jesus commands. Those are interesting and worthy discussions to have, but for today let’s just focus on the overall purpose of John the Baptist’s ministry. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, John the Baptist explained who he was and why he came: **“I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord’”** (Isaiah 40:3). Christ Jesus is coming! The Savior King of the world is coming! Get ready for Christmas (Christ Jesus first coming) and Judgment Day (Christ Jesus second coming). Just hearing those words doesn’t do justice to the visual that God is trying to get across to us. John the Baptist was carrying out his ministry in Bethany. This isn’t the Bethany that is less than 2 miles east of Jerusalem near the Mount of Olives, but rather the Bethany that is on the other side of the Jordan River which was 5.5 miles north of the Dead Sea and 21 miles northeast of Jerusalem. Bethany across the Jordan sits at an elevation of about 400 feet below sea level, which is the lowest place on

earth. Jerusalem, the place where King's rule; the place where King Jesus would ultimately conquer sin, death, and the Devil for us; the place where many people were coming to hear and be baptized by John the Baptist sits at 2474 feet above sea level. That's not Colorado Rockies height for elevation, but keep in mind Jerusalem is higher than any place in Wisconsin by 500 feet. If you traveled the 21 miles from Jerusalem to Bethany across the Jordan River you would travel over some rugged terrain and encounter almost 3000 feet in elevation change. Listen to what else the prophet Isaiah said about the ministry of John the Baptist. **"Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain"** (Isaiah 40:4). John the Baptist isn't speaking at a meeting of Israel's Public Works Department clamoring that serious road construction needs to be done in Israel. However, with the rugged visual of the terrain around Bethany across the Jordan, John the Baptist uses that imagery to convey a spiritual message. **"Make straight the way for the Lord."** Christ Jesus is coming! The Savior King of the world is coming! Get ready for Christmas (Christ Jesus first coming) and Judgment Day (Christ Jesus second coming). If you are going to be ready to celebrate the true meaning of Christmas and prepared to experience joy on Judgment Day, then serious spiritual road construction needs to be done in your heart and life. What's involved in spiritual road construction? Listen to John the Baptist. **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near"** (Matthew 3:2). Listen to Mark describe the ministry of John the Baptist. **"And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River"** (Mark 1:4-5). Listen again to John the Baptist. **"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham"** (Luke 3:7b-8). Do you sense a key theme in John the Baptist's message? Repentance. Let's take a few moments today to talk about what true repentance isn't and what it is.

First, let's talk about the spiritual construction work of repentance that would NOT get a 5 star google review by God.

- **"The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector"** (Luke 18:11). It's not that this person didn't think he was a sinner. He just thought other people's sins were more offensive to God than his. Not true repentance.
- **"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance"** (Luke 3:7b-8). This is the "Sorry, not sorry" brand of repentance. The words "I'm sorry" come out of your mouth, but your attitude, actions, and the words that follow tell a different story.
- **"If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell"** (Matthew 5:29). Jesus isn't literally telling us to poke out our eyes, but he is telling us to take our sins seriously and to understand that we deserve nothing less than eternal punishment in Hell for our sins. Taking an 'aw shucks, everybody sins approach to spiritual matters is not true repentance.
- **"And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham"** (Luke 3:8). Just because you came from a Christian family or have membership in a Christian church doesn't automatically mean that you are

truly repentant of your sins.

- **“If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God”** (Hebrews 10:26-27). Knowing that something is sinful, yet you deliberately keep on doing it anyway, that is not true repentance.

Now, let’s talk about the spiritual construction work of repentance that WOULD get a 5 star google review by God.

- **“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his chest and said ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner”** (Luke 18:13). No excuses for sin, just humility, is a sign of true repentance.
- **“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst”** (1 Timothy 1:15). Thinking that my sins are more offensive to God than anyone else’s is a sign of true repentance.
- **“So I find this law at work: When I want to good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!”** (Romans 7:21-25a). A sign of true repentance is struggling with sin, fighting against temptation, desiring not to do those same sins again instead of deliberately giving in to sin is a sign of true repentance.
- **“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags”** (Isaiah 64:6). True repentance is admitting that sin has infiltrated every aspect of my life, even my good deeds, as my motives to do these good deeds are sometimes guilt, fear, or to serve me in some way.
- **“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise”** (Psalm 51:17). Genuine sorrow over your sinfulness is a sign of true repentance.

John the Baptist is encouraging each of us to listen to our conscience and to the Word of God so that the Holy Spirit can do his powerful work of leading sinners, like us, to true repentance. And when true repentance happens then valleys and mountains of sin have been leveled and your King Jesus can ride into your heart on a smooth road offering the peace of forgiveness for all of your sins because he paid the eternal punishment of Hell for them all when he suffered and died on the cross. True repentance allows King Jesus to ride into your heart on a smooth road to rescue you from a nagging guilty conscience as he replaces it with a clear conscience ready to serve God and others again on a daily basis. True repentance allows King Jesus to ride into your heart on a smooth road to offer you confidence as you face death and eternity because Jesus already secured you a place in Heaven through his perfect work as your Savior. Make straight the way for the Lord through repentance so you can celebrate the true meaning of Christmas. And once you know the true meaning of Christmas, that allows you to face Judgment Day with confidence and excitement as well. Amen.