

STRANGE Predictions

A sermon on Matthew 3:1-6

The other day I was working on plans to get this church ready for Christmas. I had sent out an email on how we were going to decorate: A big tree, ornaments, wreaths, etc.

Someone, very thoughtfully and wisely pointed out:
Those candles that we usually pass out for the candlelight service...
Should we do those?

You'd have to wipe them between every use.
Wear gloves as you pass them out.
And when people lowered their masks to blow them out, well...that kinda defeats the purpose of the masks.

And I said:
Hmmm...
You're right.
No candle preparation necessary.

Christmas preparations are strangely different this year.
But maybe that's by design.

This year, more than ever, God has blessed us with a much shorter To-Do List.
Rather than fill it up with virtual versions of holiday busy-ness.
Perhaps we fill it up with something of eternal benefit.
Something to bring us closer to God.

Something...
STRANGE.

Today we are going to look some STRANGE preparations. Before we learn about them, a prayer: **O Lord, strengthen us by the truth. Your Word is the truth. Open our eyes to see what you want us to see; open our ears to hear what you want us to hear; and open our hearts to believe what you would have us believe. Amen.**

I. A STRANGE Messenger

The lesson we are looking at comes from Matthew 3. Time-wise, it occurs years after the birth of Jesus, but before Jesus begins his earthly ministry. It is a section of Scripture filled with a certain type of strange preparation promoted by a rather strange individual.

In those days, John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the wilderness of Judea... (Mt. 3:1)

The word for wilderness indicates a place in the desert.
A place far apart from civilization.
A place surrounded by bugs and wild animals.

A place...that would be a very strange choice as a preaching station.

Most preachers preached in the synagogues.
Most preachers preached in the towns.
Most preachers preached where people were.

John's location was a strange place to start preaching.

John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. (v.4a)

Again – a bit of a strange choice.

Most of the people who served in the local synagogues did so while wearing fine robes.
The high priest was especially well dressed.

He wore a golden crown around his head.

He wore priestly breastplate.

He wore an expensively fashioned breastplate.

He had fine gemstones like rubies, emerald and diamonds fastened to it.

He wore a delicately woven ephod.

He wore a fine linen underneath the ephod.

But John didn't wear any of that.

He wore camel skins.

Itchy.

Scratchy.

Something that even your average, everyday citizen wouldn't be caught going to church in.

His food was locusts and wild honey. (v.4b)

Which...

Well, look at one of them.

Aren't they cute?

The beady eyes.

The sinewy legs.

The creepy antenna.

Who wouldn't want to eat a locust?

Answer:

Everybody that wasn't John the Baptist.

But perhaps one of the strangest things about John the Baptist wasn't his look, his location, or his food choice.

It was how well his "wilderness church" was growing.

Then Jerusalem, all of Judea, and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him. (V.5)

Essentially this would be like large groups of people abandoning their Sunday church homes.

Heading out to the shores of the Neuse River.

Maybe under a dirty bridge.

And listening to a guy that looked kinda like a hobo!

John was a STRANGE messenger.

II. STRANGE Fulfillment

Why?

Why were so many people abandoning their traditional religious spaces and headed out to the wilderness to hear

what this wild looking man had to say?

Because of his message.
It wasn't your typical message.
It was a bit...STRANGE.

“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!” (v.3)

The word “repent” in its simplest form means to change direction.

If you are driving down the street and you miss your exit, the nice lady on the phone will tell you to, “Take a u-turn ahead.”

Because you are going the wrong direction.
You need to turn around.

Outwardly, “repent” means that if you're doing a sinful action, you change direction and not do it anymore. In a deeper sense, full repentance means that if you're doing a sinful action, you change the direction of your heart.

That you turn around to follow the course that God wants.
Rather than the sinful course that you want.

Why was this such a strange message?

Because...

Those priests.
Those Pharisees.
Those people that gathered in the synagogue with the fancy clothing.

They didn't tell each other to change their hearts.
Because they thought their hearts were just fine.
It was everyone else who needed to change.

This message bred a very different version of repentance.

**PHARISAICAL REPENTANCE:
Other's hearts need to CHANGE; my heart is FINE.**

The funny thing about this.
As you read that on the screen right now.
You are probably thinking:

Man, that is awful.
Man, they really needed to change.
I'm glad I don't a heart like that.

You know...

Responding to the pharisaical repentance of the Pharisees.
With some pharisaical repentance of your own.

Pharisaical repentance is a huge temptation in 2020.

You know who needs to change: it's the rest of the world.

All those people who don't wear their mask enough.
All those people who wear those masks too often.

All those Democrats.
All those Republicans.

The problem is with my spouse.
The problem is with my friend.
The problem is with Great Uncle Joe.
The problem is with my kids.
The problem is with mom and dad.

The problem is not my problem, because I don't have a problem.

Another way to say Pharisaical repentance is...
Not repentance.

John's message was different from that of the Pharisees.
John's message challenged each hearer to stop looking outside themselves for change.
Instead, to look inside.

God agreed.
John's message led to godly repentance.

GODLY REPENTANCE:
I need to change; MY heart is a MESS.

It's not like the Pharisees were entirely wrong.
The world was filled with sinners.
The world was certainly a mess.

But they had forgotten that they were a part of that world.

Don't you forget.

Don't hear this message and think – I should send it to someone else.
Don't hear this message and think – I hope so-and-so is listening.
Don't hear this message and think – This really applies to my spouse.

Stop.
Apply it to yourself.

Repent.
Repent of your sin.
Repent of your lust.
Repent of your greed.
Repent of your hatred.
Repent of your racism.
Repent of your selfishness.
Repent of your pride.
Repent of your hatefulness.

Repent of your sins.
Repent of your sinful heart.

III. STRANGE Urgency

One of the most powerful things about John's message is the timeline that he gives.

He doesn't say repent sometime before the end of 2020.

He doesn't say repent in the next couple of days.

He doesn't even say repent after you think it over for a while, like the next couple of hours or something...before the Panther game starts.

Nope.

“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near!” (v.3)

We have all been eagerly anticipating the vaccine for COVID-19.

It appears to be very near.

Scholars are releasing timelines that suggest a select few will be able to get it before the end of 2020.

That high priority groups might get the vaccine by early 2021.

That the general population will be able to be vaccinated into spring and summer.

That's good news.

But...

What if you don't make it until then?

What if you get COVID and it's fatal?

If there's anything we've learned during the pandemic, it's that life could end very quickly.

You know – a big question that people are asking themselves before they leave the house today is: “Am I ready for COVID?”

Do I have my mask?

Do I have my sanitizer?

Am I ready to get in and out of the store without lingering?

But there's a better question to ask.

There's a much better question to ask than simply “am I ready to face COVID?”

IT's:

Are you ready to face God?

If you're deeply engrossed in sin, you aren't.

Repent.

God's kingdom is near.

Of course, there's another way to look at John's message.

Go a little farther in Matthew 3: **The one who comes after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. (Mt. 3:11)**

It turns out that John is just a hype man.

He's just the opening act.

He's not the headliner.

But the headliner was near.

Literally.

Then Jesus came... (Mt. 3:13)

And suddenly the kingdom of God...
The King of the kingdom of God...

...was no more than a few feet away.

He was just standing over there.
You could talk to him without having to shout.
You could look at the God of the universe eye to eye.

And in those eyes.
You would see...

God's deep love for you.
Love that brought the kingdom of heaven onto the kingdom of earth.
Love that is bringing the kingdom of heaven to your heart right now.

And Mightier than John?
Absolutely.

John warned against sin.
Jesus took sin by the neck and crushed it.

John baptized with water.
Jesus baptized with the Holy Spirit himself.

John died.
Jesus died...and then came back to life.

Because of Jesus' work...
The kingdom of heaven that only brought judgment for our sin, now brings peace.
The kingdom of heaven that was impossible for us to enter has a door, wide open.
The kingdom of heaven that seemed so far off is *near*.

It's yours.
By faith.
In Jesus.

IV. STRANGE Preparations

(1) Prepare the Way

This doesn't happen as much down here. But when I was growing up winter meant snow.
(Since I lived in Wisconsin, it might be more accurate to say autumn meant snow – and sometimes late summer).
But when it snowed a significant amount, dad would wake me up.

5 am.
Get out there and start shoveling.

We had a driveway about as long as this church. We had to shovel a path because our garage was at the back of it and a foot of snow was blocking the exit, making it impossible to leave.

“Prepare the way of the Lord.” (v.3)

What things are in the way of your relationship with Jesus?

Alcohol?

A TV show?
Unfiltered internet access?
Facebook?
A relationship?
Your job?

Prepare the way.
Take a big old metaphorical shovel this December and...

Prepare the way for Jesus.
Even if it's the world thinks it's strange.

I know a guy who struggled with pornography.
He was convicted by God's Word.
He was called to repentance.
He deeply desired to please God, but he knew that it had become a type of addiction to him.

He installed filters on his internet.
He got an accountability partner.
He made his home a safe place.

But he also traveled for business.
He had to stay in hotels.
Some of those hotels have HBO.
And HBO has some late-night objectionable material.

So, you know what he did?

Whenever he got to the hotel, he would immediately enter in the room.
Unplug the TV.
Carry to the front desk.
And tell them....

I won't be needing this tonight.

Sound strange?
Sure.

But the kingdom of heaven is near.
Prepare the way for the Lord.

(2) Make the Paths Straight

Because the shortest distance between two points is a straight line.
Yet sometimes I think the way we connect with Jesus is more like a roundabout.

You know what I'm talking about?
Those big circular things that you enter without having to stop and then you have a second to determine if you should take the exit or continue. Otherwise, you have to keep going around the circle until you have the chance for the exit again.

Sometimes we do roundabouts to Jesus.

I'll get around to morning devotion, after I do a couple of laps on Facebook.
I'll get around to saying my prayer after I beat the next level on Candy Crush! (There's special bonus points right now.)

I'll get around to worship again, just after I buy all the gifts, wrap all the gifts, label all the gifts, and pass out the gifts and – ooops I forgot someone. Sorry Jesus.

Make straight the paths. (v.3)

Get Jesus on your schedule.

Don't remove Jesus from your schedule.

Set a time in the morning that you will spend with Jesus each day.

Don't think this is too hard.

There is time in your schedule for Jesus.

It's the only thing on your To-Do List with eternal important.

Make a straight path to him.

(3) Celebrate baptism.

This was a big part of John's ministry. He called people to repentance and then he would wash them with water. Physically and tangibly speaking to the people's hearts and saying, "Your sin has been washed away. Now, go live apart from it."

Have you been baptized?

Take a moment.

Marvel in it.

Your sin has been washed away.

Whatever the sin is

Whatever has been convicting your heart.

Whatever you feeling kinda *icky*.

In your baptism, Jesus washes it away.

You are clean.

You are pure.

And if you haven't been baptized?

Be baptized.

In baptism, you are washed.

Not just with some lukewarm church water.

But...

Jesus said, "Go and make disciples by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Mt. 28:19)

You are washed in the name of God the Father who floods the world with his love.

You are washed in the name of Jesus Christ whose blood covers all your sin.

You are washed in the name of the Holy Spirit who washes away unbelief.

Repent and be baptized.

The kingdom of God is near.

Amen.