

December has to be, by far, the craziest month of the year – wouldn't you agree? If someone from another planet were to come and watch our world during this month, that visitor would conclude that we have completely lost our minds. Why is this month so crazy? It's because we are preparing, aren't we. As the husband balances precariously on his ladder, hanging the icicle lights in just the right spot – he's preparing. As men and women hit the shopping malls in Orlando with a high level of intensity and aggressiveness – they're preparing. As houses become filled with the smell of cookies, and radio stations change around their programming to include old, nostalgic songs about chestnuts and a winter wonderland – people are preparing, because soon, it will be Christmas time.

December is a month of preparation. In the church year, we are also in a season of preparation called "Advent." Advent is a Latin word which means "approach" or "arrival." Advent is that time of the year when we prepare for the arrival of Christ. We prepare to celebrate his first arrival, his humble, quiet birth in Bethlehem. But we're also preparing for his second arrival, when Christ will come in all of his majesty, with the loud, trumpet call of God on Judgment Day.

This month of December is the season of Advent for us Christians. Just as we do all kinds of physical things to prepare for Christmas, we also do spiritual things to prepare ourselves for Christ. It's easy to prepare for the holiday of Christmas – just look at what other people are doing – you'll figure it out. But how do you prepare for Christ? It's a mystery for many people. If you look at the title of our sermon for today, I think it reflects how many people are this time of the year. "I am ready for Christmas! (explanation point) But ready for Christ? (question mark) What does that mean?"

There is someone who teaches you how to do this, and he appears every December. No, it's not Rudolph or Frosty or Santa – it's "John the Baptist." He was called that not because he was the founder of the Baptist church. Far from it – John held his "services" in the desert – no chairs, no heater, no robe with decorations – his church was out in the desert, by the Jordan River. And what did he talk about out there? Look at verse 3: "He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." He was called the "baptist" because he encouraged people to be baptized. And, he encouraged people to repent.

This wasn't his idea. This was his destiny – this was God's purpose for his life – John was talked about hundreds of years before he lived, as it says in verse 4: "As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: A voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord." John had been called by God to prepare people for the arrival of the Messiah – Jesus Christ was about to start his public ministry, and John was preparing people, getting them ready. He did that by teaching the people to repent.

It says in our lesson, "Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth." John the Baptist sounds like a highway construction worker in his call to repent. What is this all about? The imagery that is used here describes the custom of what would happen when an ancient king would travel to places within his realm. In a day before there was a regular network of interconnected roads and freeways, feverish work crews would go ahead of the king, making sure to have ready a smooth path between the king's palace and his intended destination. Low points would be filled in, high points leveled, twists and turns of footpaths would become straight so the king could reach his destination

unhindered.

Do you get the point? It is just such road construction that John the Baptist was called to do. And he was called to do that work, not only for his first hearers who happened to travel out to hear him in person by the Jordan, but also for us today, and every day. And did you hear anything offensive to you in the setting Isaiah paints? It's not by accident that John's work was carried out in one of the most outwardly God-forsaken places on earth – the Jordan valley heading down to the Dead Sea. It's not by accident that Isaiah said this voice was crying out about making a highway in a wilderness. And this wilderness seems to be about the least likely place for a road. Suddenly you realize the Lord is not really describing the topography of any place on a map. God is talking about what the human heart looks like to him by nature. The valleys – a word that literally means sharp, jagged ravines – that is a way of picturing how human sin blocks the path of the holy God. The mountains and hills are the pride and despair that our hearts put in in God's path to get to us. Everything crooked and uneven, well that's an all too fitting description of the fact that by nature "every inclination of the thoughts of [our] heart[s] [is] only evil all the time" (Genesis 6:5). God isn't describing the topography of anything that could appear on the National Geographic channel. He painting a graphic portrayal of what the human heart has become as a barrier between the Creator and his creatures. By nature it is an impassible, desert road. The way the road becomes passable is to repent.

Do you know what it means to "repent"? To "repent" means to make a U-turn, to change direction. John was telling the people to change the direction of their lives. They were going one way, unprepared for Christ. John told them to turn their lives around and go the other way.

This, my friends, is how you can prepare for Christ too. Repent. Think of repentance this way – first you identify, and then, you do the opposite. First, you identify what is sinful in your life. This will take some quiet time on your part. Turn off the TV, the radio in your car. Shut down the internet. Take a break from shopping and decorating. And just sit, and think, and identify the weaknesses in your life. What is your weakness, your sin? Are you materialistic? Do you like to be surrounded by things? Are you selfish? Do you have impure, immoral thoughts? Are you impatient with others? Do you say things about other people that you really shouldn't say? What are your sins? Identify them. This is the first part of repentance. And then the second, do the opposite. Instead of being materialistic, be spiritual. Instead of being selfish, be generous. Instead of being immoral, strive to be pure in your mind. Do the opposite. Change direction in your life. Make a U-turn. That's repentance.

Ahh, but I left out the most important thing. Do you know what that is? Without this, you'll never successfully change in your life. You'll try, and maybe you'll be successful for awhile. But without the most important thing, you'll eventually fall back into your old ways, just like someone on a crash diet who eventually gains all the weight back. Do you know what the most important part of repentance is?

It is Christ. Without Christ, true repentance is impossible, and you will never change. But with Christ, anything is possible. After you identify your sins, take them to Christ. Take them to the foot of the cross. As someone once said, "when your soul has laid down its faults at the feet of Christ, you feel as though you have wings." Confess your shortcomings to Christ. And then rejoice, because he forgives you all of your sins. "I

forgive you,” Christ says. “I died on the cross for all those faults you have. I was punished for your weaknesses. I forgive you.”

And that is when you experience true Christian joy. And as Christ forgives you, he also gives you strength. If you want to make changes in your life, Christ will give you the strength you need. As Philippians chapter four says, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

If you want to stop being so materialistic, and instead, be more spiritual, Christ will give you the strength to do that. If you want to stop being selfish, and instead, be generous, Christ will strengthen you. If you want to stop being immoral in your thoughts, and instead, be pure, Christ will help you. If you want to be more loving, more patient, more kind, then do this - take your sins to Christ, confess them. Let him forgive you. And as he forgives you, he will strengthen you to be a brand new person.

That’s repentance. That’s what John the Baptist was talking about in the desert. John pointed the people to Christ as he talked about verse 6: “All mankind will see God’s salvation.” Christ is God’s salvation. Where can you go today and see him? On Christmas Eve, the shepherds found him in the most unusual place – not a palace, not a throne. But a humble stable. And still today, if you want to see God’s salvation, if you want to see Christ – you will find him in humble places. Here, in the humble Word of God, here is God’s salvation.

Here in the humble sacrament of baptism, here is Christ. About a month ago, in a private ceremony in a Lutheran church in Rockford, MI my one and only grandson was baptized. All 5 lbs and 11 ounces of him. Do you realize that you as I saw the pictures of Everett being baptized I was seeing God’s salvation. Christ was working in Everett’s heart, changing him, giving him faith, giving him the forgiveness of sins. That’s God’s salvation.

Here it is in the Lord’s Supper. Today, some of you will take it. For others of you, that day isn’t far away at all. Here in humble bread and wine you find God’s salvation – the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins.

Are you ready for Christmas this year? More importantly, are you ready for Christ? Are you ready to celebrate his first coming? Are you ready to receive him, when he comes again in all of his glory? If you listen closely, over the songs about Rudolph and Frosty and Santa you hear at the mall – if you listen closely, you will hear a voice, a voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord. That is the message of Advent – repent.

Let Christ take away your sins, and change the direction of your life. Let him prepare you for the day you see him, not in a card, or a manger scene – let Christ prepare you for the day you will see him face to face. Amen.