

Sometimes, when you see and hear the same thing all the time, it starts to become less and less meaningful. So you received a mailer from Kohl's. It has 3 stickers on it. Those stickers once removed will tell you if you get 10 percent off, 20 percent off, or 30 percent off. You've gotten so used to it, and getting the 10 percent off, you don't even pull off the sticker any more. What is 10 percent? Or Fridays at Beall's, Seniors get 10 percent off. Plus, If you spend \$200, they will give you \$5.00. Big deal! Or on Black Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday area merchants and online merchants try to wow us with huge savings. They create a sense of urgency for us to buy something. Sometimes we buy stuff we really don't need, but the hype got us going. We are saturated with advertising.

I wonder if this is how it is as people think about the spiritual aspect of Christmas. Even before Thanksgiving, the stores are playing Christmas music. Lights go up on houses, along with Frosty the Snowman, Santa, and the reindeer. The Salvation army bellringers are out at Walmart ringing their bells, and reminding us to help the poor. If we didn't have Covid, there would be Christmas types of shows at the Sharon Morse Theater, or at local churches. We are almost like robots, as we realize Christmas is approaching again.

What is the real meaning of Christmas? I wonder if our society has become saturated with the same cliches, the same spiritual sappy-talk you hear every December. So much talk about love and sharing and caring and singing and hugging! Christmas! A time for family. A time for charity. Every day you hear this, in between the advertising for sales at local stores. And then all the churches jump on the bandwagon and say the same sorts of things. Come to our church, they all say. We are the friendliest. We have the best pastor. We have the best Sunday School. We have the best worship services. Come to us, and you will experience all the love and sharing and caring and hugging and singing that you're looking for this time of the year. Are we becoming saturated with spiritual sappy-talk during the month of December?

And then you meet John the Baptist, and you realize right away that he is different from all the others. I don't think you'd see him at any of those one-day sales at Kohls – we're told that he wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt, probably homemade, around his waist. Instead of Thanksgiving turkey, we're told that he ate locusts and wild honey. He probably would have done well on the television series Survivor. But he probably would have been the first one voted off the island, because of the things he said – his message. He doesn't use that spiritual sappy-talk you hear every December. He doesn't use all those cliches about caring and sharing and family and giving and hugging and singing that you hear this time of the year. You can tell right away that he's not a salesman – John the Baptist will not try to sweet talk you into anything. And he's certainly not a politician, trying to match his words to whatever the popular opinion of the day is. He's a breath of fresh air. This guy doesn't care what people say or think about him. And his message is one that hits you in the heart.

What would it be like to meet John the Baptist? If John the Baptist sat across from you at your kitchen table, what do you think he would say to you? That is what we are going to talk about on this second Sunday of the Advent season. Today we have lit the Bethlehem candle, reminding us that The Night in Bethlehem is not far away, right around the corner. How do we prepare? How do we get ready? John the Baptist has words to share with you this morning.

The first thing John the Baptist would do is pull out his credentials. "I'm not just another guy trying to get you to come to church," John would say to you. He had a special job – the prophet Isaiah talks about John when he wrote, "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, a voice of one calling in the desert, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him." John had been spoken about in the Old Testament – his job was to

prepare people for the coming of the Messiah. That's what John the Baptist would do to you if you talked to him face to face - he would work on preparing you to celebrate Christ's birth. And he would work on preparing you for the second coming of Christ. His credentials? He had been mentioned in the Old Testament hundreds of years earlier.

What would be his message? Would he tell you, "Don't forget about sharing and caring and loving as you prepare for Christmas?" What would John the Baptist say to you? Verse 4: "And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance." John would tell you that you need to repent. There is something wrong with you, John would say. And it's time to change.

How would you respond? Maybe you'd think to yourself - "What does this guy know? I'm fine the way I am. I work hard. I take care of my personal responsibilities. I'm not perfect, but I'm OK." But that's the problem - we're not perfect. And the Bible makes it very very clear that God is not satisfied with anything except perfection. God wants you to be the perfect husband, the perfect wife, the perfect son or daughter. You need to be a perfect worker on your job. You need to be perfectly loving, perfectly patient, perfectly kind, perfectly generous, not just in your actions, but in your thinking. You need to be a perfect Christian, a perfect person of prayer, a perfect worshiper, a perfect student of the Word of God. You need to have perfect priorities. Jesus Christ says, "Be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect."

But you and I know that this isn't the case. We are not perfect. And, according to the Word of God, if you're not perfect, then you're sinful. That's why John the Baptist would say to you, repent. Do you remember what it means to repent? There are three "R's" to repentance, the first one being recognizing your sin. Verse 5 tells us that this is what those first century Christians did: "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins..." Recognize your sin. Where have you been less than perfect in your life? Look back on your conversations, on the way you have dealt with the people around you. Think about your relationship with God. Think about your thoughts. Where have you been less than perfect? Recognize your sin, and confess your sin to Christ.

After that first "R" of repentance comes the second "R," and that is receiving forgiveness from God. Verse 4 talks about a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." The Lord God almighty forgives you for all your imperfections. Because of Christ, your sins are gone. God holds no grudges, keeps no record of wrongs. He forgives you completely. The people that came out to John received God's forgiveness through the Sacrament of Baptism. Today, you also receive that same forgiveness, when you were baptized, and every time you hear God's forgiveness spoken to you. That is the second "R" of repentance, receiving God's forgiveness.

The final "R" is reforming your life. That means that after you have been forgiven for being so impatient, you become patient in your life. After you have been forgiven for having a bad temper, you become gentle. After you have been forgiven for being so greedy, you become generous. After you have been forgiven for disobeying God and making excuses, you begin to obey God, not because you have to, but because you want to. You change from a self-centered worshiper of pleasure to an others-centered worshiper of God. The final "R" of repentance is when your life is reformed, changed, from how it was before.

But how do I do this? How do I find courage to confess all my sins to God? How do I know that I am really forgiven? Where can I find strength to change, to reform my life? How does this take place? What would John the Baptist say to you? He would say, "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie." Back then, that was the job of a slave. I'm not even worthy to do that, John says.

Someone is coming. Someone greater than you, greater than I. He is the one who will give you courage to confess all your sins to God. He is the one who will take every single one of your sins away. He is the one who will strengthen you and change you into a new person, a new creation. John said, "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Someone greater, more powerful, more compelling, more amazing than anyone that has ever lived, someone is coming. He will demonstrate his power in all kinds of ways. His miracles. His resurrection. His gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. And his gift of the Holy Spirit and faith and hope and love to you.

One thing I've noticed is that there are a lot of holiday recipes out there. A special recipe for egg nog, a special recipe for the perfect Christmas dinner. This is the time of the year not only for sharing our love, but also our recipes! Obviously, John the Baptists didn't have a lot of recipes people would have been interested in, unless you're planning to eat grasshoppers and wild honey for your Christmas dinner. But what would John the Baptist say to you, if you were to ask him, "What is the recipe for a successful Christmas?" What would John the Baptist say? According to our text for this morning, John would tell you that there are two main ingredients – the recipe for a successful Christmas is this – a heart full of repentance, and a heart full of Christ. Practice the three "R's" of repentance, and ponder the mystery and majesty of Jesus Christ – those two ingredients make up the recipe for a successful Christmas, regardless of your circumstances. You can be living by yourself out in the desert, with nothing to eat but grasshoppers and wild honey. But even for you, your Christmas will be successful, as you repent and focus on Christ.

Let your Christmas preparation be a time that is filled with more than just a series of advertising and empty cliches. Caring and sharing and family and giving and charity are all good things, not just for Christmas, but all year round. These things cannot be truly enjoyed or carried out until you first understand that Christmas is a time for repentance, and a time for Christ. It is a time to rejoice that someone has come, someone greater than John the Baptist, greater than you or I, someone has come who brings real meaning to this special time of the year. Amen.