

## "Prepare For Christmas" John 1:19-27 Rorate Caeli 2023

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, every year I am surprised how much time and energy goes into preparing for Christmas. So many things to do... and in the end so few things that really matter.

The famous American author John Grisham wrote a delightful little novel about Christmas. It is called: "Skipping Christmas". It is about a middle-aged middle-class American couple. The kids have left the house. For the first time, only Mom and Dad are left to celebrate Christmas. And Dad is so fed up with all the fuzz surrounding Christmas—the decorations, the gifts, the food, the caroling—that he decides to skip Christmas altogether. He books a trip to an exotic and tropical place for him and his wife. He refuses to decorate the house with thousands of Christmas lights and mega-sized reindeers on the roof. Nothing.

I get it. Sometimes I wish I could escape Christmas and flee far away – it's one of the most stressful times of year for a pastor! But you cannot really escape it altogether. Even in corners of the world where there are hardly any Christians—take Japan, for example—Christmas is everywhere.

And there is the problem. Christmas is not about Jesus anymore. It is about us. Even here in Canada, with a 50% Christian population—at least nominally—Christmas is not so much about Jesus anymore. Listen to the Christmas songs that fill the shopping malls and supermarkets, or that play on the radio from early morning till late evening. They are about Christmas—the spirit of Christmas, the light of Christmas, the warmth of Christmas, the peace of Christmas, the love of Christmas. They want to make us believe that Christmas itself—that three-day celebration in December—somehow makes a difference.

I doubt it! I believe that there are many people, even in Canada, who would love to skip Christmas. Housewives who don't want to spend many long days cleaning the house, shopping for food, and

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making those traditional Christmas dishes. Parents who feel guilty because they cannot afford to buy the Christmas gifts that the kids are asking for. Families that use their credit cards to the limit and beyond, and who buy now and pay next year, only to find themselves deeply in debt when the bills start coming in in January.

How then should we celebrate Christmas? How to prepare for this special celebration of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem?

Our theme for today is "Prepare the way for the King." Our Gospel reading is not about what happened before the birth of Jesus. Today, we look thirty years further, to the time when a man named John, a cousin of Jesus, started preaching and baptizing people in the Jordan river.

John's preaching was about repentance. He went around preaching: "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand!" The people of Israel were living through what is often called the dark ages of Israel. For four hundred years, no prophet had appeared to speak God's words to his people. The social, economic, and political life of Israel had derailed. There was corruption, discrimination, exploitation, and abuse of power. For many Jews, religion was not relevant anymore. And like Christmas today, the religious festivals had lost their original significance for many people.

Israel was still waiting for a savior, the son of David. But their expectations were predominantly political. And after so many centuries of waiting, people began to feel restless. So, when John appeared with his message of the kingdom of God being just around the corner, many people got excited. They wanted to be counted in with the winners when the Messiah arrived to liberate the nation. If that required repentance, that was a small price to pay. Perhaps they realized that the Messiah would not come before the people were back into a right relationship with God.

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John invited the people to make a public commitment of repentance. The baptism that John practiced was a baptism of repentance. It was a symbolic washing away of sins, and a cleansing of the heart. And many people wanted to make that commitment. They came from all over the country to be baptized by John. Sometimes, they would have to stand in line all day.

It was a pretty spontaneous movement. But as you can guess, there are always people who feel the need to put what is happening into a larger perspective. In this case, Jewish leaders from Jerusalem were eager to find out who John really was. What were his credentials? Where did he come from? Where did he get his message from? How could he tell that the kingdom of God was really getting near?

It is interesting to see how John answers them. The question was “Who are you?” But he starts telling them who he is not. He probably knew that people had made up lots of explanations for themselves concerning the identity of John. Their first guess—and certainly their most intense hope—was that he was the Messiah. Some thought of the promise that God had made to Moses to raise up another Prophet like him. That is what we just read in the text from Deuteronomy 18:

The Lord said to me: ‘I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites.’” Still others remembered the words spoken through the prophet Malachi, who said: “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.” And so, one after another, John denies being what people expect and hope for: “I am not the Messiah.” “I am not Elijah.” “I am not the Prophet.”

Finally, when he had sunk all their expectations and hopes, he was ready to say who or what he actually was, using the words of Isaiah: “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”

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When Isaiah spoke those words, the Holy Land was not much more than a bunch of towns and villages with fields around them, where the farmers grew their crops. The rest was one big wilderness. There were paths connecting the towns and villages, but they were narrow and winding. In many places they were outright dangerous because they were surrounded by hills and rocks, making them an ideal place for robbers to attack travelers. You may remember that Jesus spoke about the road from Jericho to Jerusalem in his story of the Good Samaritan.

There were two roads that could actually be called highways. One was along the coastline of the Mediterranean. The other led through the Jordan Valley. It was called the King's Highway. Both were mainly used by traders, and they had been there already in the time of Moses.

But Jerusalem, the city of king David and of the Messiah, the future King of Israel, was not connected to these main highways. If a king wanted to come to Jerusalem in splendor, with horses and chariots and whatever else would fit the parade, a new highway needed to be constructed to get him there. What John is saying about himself is this: He is the guy, sent ahead by the king, to tell people living near and around the route to Jerusalem, that the king is coming soon. Therefore, they should start working on road construction.

But John's message was not: "Get your spades and shovels out and start digging!" He only said: "Repent!" It was obvious that the way of the Messiah was going to be prepared through a spiritual revival. That is what John's baptism signified. When John calls people to repent, he calls them into the kingdom of God. That is a community.

When John quotes Isaiah 40, he also implies what is written in Isaiah 40:5: "And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together." There are two clear emphases here. First, the

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focus is on God—on his glory. And second, all people will see it together, in community.

To prepare the way for God, he built a community. First, he called the nation of Israel to be his community. They were excited about it, but in the end, they were not faithful. They turned their backs to him as often as they could.

Then, Jesus came and called people to follow him. And he gave them the mission to go out and make other people follow him, too. And he taught them the principle of community—a community which is not based on family or tribe or nation; a community which is not based on geography or history or language. Together, we are the body of Christ. Together, we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. But community is not a purpose in and of itself. Our purpose and our focus should be the glory of the Lord, our King. He wants us to look at the light of his glory rather than stare at the darkness of our own sinful minds.

Repentance is vital. We cannot really live without forgiveness and reconciliation. But they are a means to the end. Repentant hearts and lives re-aligned with God: they are the highway for the Lord. They are the way, not the destination. The cross of Christ is essential and crucial for our faith, our salvation, and our future. But the cross is the way, not the destination.

So, how then should we prepare for Christmas? How should we prepare the way for the King? The first step, no doubt, is repentance—reconsidering the values that we hold and on which we built our lives. The four weeks of Advent are a season of reflection, repentance, fasting and prayer, even though our society has turned it into a “Holiday Season”. Instead of frantically cleaning and decorating and shopping and baking for Christmas, could we slow down and ask ourselves: What should we do to let Christ be King in our lives?

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Secondly, we should bear witness to the glory of God. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

Modern society has taken Christ out of Christmas. Let us put him back in the center. Let our lives tell our friends, our colleagues and our neighbors in language that cannot be misunderstood: Christ is the Light of the world. Christ is the Savior of the world. Christ is the King of the world. Amen.