

## Are You Ready For Christmas?

## Matthew 3: 1-12

What would you think if you took your kids or grandkids to the mall to see Santa, and when you finally get to the front of line, instead of jolly old Saint Nick, there's a guy sitting there in animal skins, long hair, long beard, looking like he just came out of the wilderness, telling people to get right with God? Nobody lines up to take pictures with John the Baptist. That doesn't change the fact that *to get to the Christ of Christmas, you have to go through John.*

Here's what I mean. Every Advent, John the Baptist comes out of the desert, wearing his Old Testament prophet uniform—looking wild. But his message is even wilder. He is not polite. He's not trying to spare peoples' feelings. He cuts right to the chase, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." He is saying to anyone who will listen: "Get right with God." Cut through all the distractions, eliminate the nonsense in your life. Stop turning away from God. God is searching for you. Let him find you.

It comes as no surprise that the "religious" people have a problem with John. He's not one of them. Plus, he's popular; and his message of radical change threatens to upset the status quo. And, they're about to find out just how radical John is. Because John is going to insist that your standing with God is not based on your race or your family tree or your resume.

On the television show M\*A\*S\*H, Dr. Charles Emerson Winchester III made it clear what separated him from everybody else: "I'm a Winchester," he would say. For him, it was his family name that made him superior to everyone else. Other people do it in different ways. One woman received her education at Harvard and found a way to work Harvard into every conversation. That's what John the Baptist was dealing with here in a spiritual sense. He was unimpressed with the very thing that the religious people had built their lives upon. They were the "children of Abraham." It's like they said, "I'm a Winchester."

Then comes John the Baptist, who tells them, in so many words, "That doesn't mean a thing." Do you sense how John translates to our situation? Can't you hear him say: "Just because your name is on the church roster, just because you made your confirmation, just because your parents or grandparents came to this church, just because you are a volunteer, just because you are the pastor; none of those things alone are what saves you. Just saying, "I'm a Winchester," "I'm a Lutheran," or even "I'm a Christian," doesn't make it so. **In what or in whom do you place your ultimate trust?** That's the question. If your answer is, "yourself," John has only words of warning for you. There's no way around this confrontation. *To get to the Christ of Christmas, you have to go through John*, as unpleasant as that may seem.

John the Baptist is crashing the "Winter Holiday Party" and making a scene that we dare not ignore. "Repent!" he says. Take a look at your life, see where you have put your priorities, where your treasure really lies. To "repent" means to

"change your mind." When you repent of sin, you're saying, "I thought it was a good thing, but now I know it's not." Last week we talked about repentance as saying 'no' to things that block our way to Jesus—and saying 'yes' to things that clear the path.

Let's go deeper. Do you realize that repentance is not a once-in-a-lifetime event, but a daily action? We need to "die daily to our sin," as Martin Luther once wrote. Or, as author Richard Jensen says, "the repentant person comes before God saying, 'I can't do it myself God. Kill me and give me new life. You buried me in baptism. Bury me again today. Raise me to new life.'"

If that seems overly dramatic to you, you may be falling asleep spiritually. John-the-Baptist-style repentance is the wake-up call. There's a lot of talk these days about "being real." How important it is to be authentic. Well, it doesn't get more real than repentance. It doesn't get more real than dropping the mask and saying, "You know what? I know I don't live up. I know I'm spiritually dry and my priorities are all messed up. I need help." Here's one more way to think of it. This is from Timothy Keller, a pastor in New York City, who said: "Group A thinks that Group B is the problem, and Group B thinks that Group A is the problem, but a Christian knows the problem is me."

Repentance is being real and admitting, "the problem is me."

Strange but true: there is a part of us that wants to hold onto sin. You can be tempted with assumptions like, "Jesus is so loving that I can hold onto this sin. Maybe it makes my life easier. Maybe I'm afraid to live without it. Maybe I just like it. At any rate, the savior that I have in mind is one who tells me that those sins are okay, that he'll save me anyway." But God is not a permissive parent.

I imagine Jesus asking, "Let you hold on to sin? I've already carried all your sins to the cross and suffered them there. The only way you can have them now is to take them back from Me. I didn't go to the cross to let you keep drinking poison; I swallowed it all!" Do you see? To hold onto sin now is to say that you want a Savior who dies for most of your sins, but not all of them. *But to get to the real Savior, the reason for the season, the Christ of Christmas, you have to go through John, and change your mind.*

We look forward to our Christmas celebration in just a couple weeks' time. But do you realize: Jesus is as near to you today as He was to Mary the day of His birth. He's that close. He's here for you in Scripture and at His Supper table. A rebirth is here for you, if you want it. Jesus is here to usher you into a feast that dwarfs the most elaborate Christmas party you've ever seen. So stop running. Clear a path for God to come in and renovate. Repent, for heaven is near in the grace of Jesus. It's the heaven of knowing that God isn't looking for people who act perfect or have the right pedigree; he is looking for people who will drop the mask; who will say, "the problem is me." Why? Because He can come to that person and say, **"The solution is me."**

