

As you do your Christmas shopping, there are many things to consider. Here’s two: How well do you know the person you’re shopping for? And how do you plan to present the gift? It’s fairly easy to find the right gift if you know a person’s interests and hobbies. And the way you present your present matters a lot too; If you leave the price tag on, that’s pretty awkward, or you say, “Here’s something I made, but I didn’t quite get it finished,” that’s not going to be very impressive.

There’s a lot of preparing going on this time of year in order to present things in just the right way, and it makes me wonder, are you preparing to present your heart to God? Is that even on your list?

What would that even look like? Well, a disciple of Jesus is going to counteract the busyness of December with quiet moments. A disciple of Jesus will create time for our eyes to see the Savior; our ears to hear of his love; our lips to sing his praises; our hands to serve those around us so that with our minds and hearts we might truly, truly celebrate the greatest birth the world has ever known. Are you preparing to present yourself to Jesus?

This morning we are reminded of the poetic prophecies of Isaiah. There is so much we could talk about, but we can only zero in on one thing. And Matthew, writing his gospel, does the work for us. Again, he begins chapter three by saying: “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.” Matthew connects all the dots for us. About 600 years before John lifts his voice in the wilderness, Isaiah summarizes his message. That’s astounding. A 600-year sneak peek. But John the Baptist did not show up to say, “Prepare the Christmas Goose” or “Prepare to shop for an iPad.” John showed up to say “Prepare your heart for the Lord to come in. Make a straight path for Him to come into your life and renovate.” How do you line up with that message? Is there a straight path for Jesus to take to get into your heart? Or is it more like an obstacle course? What do you have to shove aside in order to clear the path?

Last week’s message was: Expect Jesus to show up this Advent. The message of John the Baptist adds to that, saying, “When Jesus shows up, things have to change.” They have to change in your heart, in the deepest part of what makes you ‘you.’ It’s very easy for our Christmas preparation to slip into ritual and routine. What John is talking about is very different. He says, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. It’s almost like the prophet is saying that the day is coming, faster than you can imagine, when it won’t matter that you found the right Lego set; it won’t matter that you left the pie in the oven too long. The only thing that will matter is: are you ready to meet Jesus? When you arrive at that moment, what will you present to him?

Before you answer that question, let me remind you of God’s gift to you. Scripture tells us, again and again, that Jesus purified and cleansed us with his blood at Calvary. He did it without your asking. He does not owe it to you. He does not have to give it. But He gives it because he loves. God’s present to you is a new life. What’s your present to him?

Might I suggest something He'd like? How about a change of mind? A change in attitude? A changed life? A new emphasis on going God's way. A new effort to really be a disciple of Jesus; a follower of Jesus Christ; making that straight path for Him to come in and take over. Then the Refiner can come in and purify you; then Jesus can come in with the strange soap of His blood and thoroughly clean your soul. All of God's spokesmen, all the prophets, including Isaiah and right up to John the Baptist and Jesus himself have said the very same thing: Repent and believe the good news! Change direction! Return to the Lord and receive the blessing that He can only give to those who admit their sins. Don't stop him from the remodeling he wants to do in you.

Have you ever given someone a Christmas present, and you can just tell they don't really like it? It reminds of a story about a classroom of second graders that did a Christmas gift exchange. It was the old draw-a-name-out-of-a-hat-type thing. Well, one girl got the name of another girl in the class that she really liked and wanted to be better friends with. So the eight-year-old went through a lot of thought and piggy-bank expense (although Mom did chip in) to select just the right present for the occasion. She had high hopes that her classmate would take one look at the gift and a great new friendship would be born.

But on the day of the Christmas Party, with the second grade class decked out in red and green sweaters and Santa hats, and the time came for each child to open their presents, well, it happened something like this. The girl who had been so carefully shopped for calmly tore open the wrapping paper, looked at the gift with a blank expression, and tossed it to the side, where it fell off the side of the desk. Not even a false "thank you."

"But I picked it out just for you!" the little girl said, crushed by the rejection. As the teacher tried to salvage the situation, the girl stood in front of her classmate's desk and asked, in disbelief, "Don't you like my present?"

Sometimes I think that God's heart breaks the same way. He looks at all the things we chase after and says, "Don't you like my present?" Don't you like the gift of my Son? Don't you like having a clean, pure life?" What would you say to him?

One thing I know is He will never reject you. He will never toss you aside. This Christmas, He wants to give you the riches of heaven itself. Let Him. Amen.