

# Preparing the Way

Matthew 3:1-12

A Sermon from the Pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign  
December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022, Second Sunday of Advent  
Matt Matthews

*Matthew 3:1-12*                    *1In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” 3This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,*

*“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’”*

*4Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*

It is Advent, the four-week season leading up to Christmas Day. This is the second Sunday of Advent. We have two Sundays to go. We are preparing our hearts for the incarnation of God. God became human, we Christians believe, at the birth of Jesus in a manger, long ago—*Silent night, holy night/All is calm, all is bright*. This Christ, God’s anointed, Emmanuel, we believe, is coming again as the exclamation point of human time, to welcome all of earth into heaven. And we believe Christ is with us now, showing up when we least expect him; and we pray, pray, pray he’ll be born again in our hearts, and that we, miracle of miracles, might be born again in his.

As a child, I had some trouble understanding this season of Advent and Christmas. I understood that Jesus had come. That was good news. But it was a little like celebrating the birthday of a great grandparent you had never met. I could get my mind around this historical birth—its wonder, its joy, its mystery, and, even, its political outrage. (What? A king is born in manger hay? What? Angels share the news first of all with shepherds, the blue collar, the itinerate, the unlanded?)

I understood the concept that Jesus was coming again. I wasn’t sure if he’d come back like a beloved shepherd hugging the glad flock or the exiled king with lightening bolts, but he was coming, and I’m glad about that. This earth is God’s, as is all the cosmos, and like the owner of the vineyard, God will come to check on things.

But the idea that Jesus was being born again in my heart at Christmas? This took some time. I’d be moved to tears at the Christmas night service at my home church. I’ve written about this, so you know the story. My parents were too tired to attend that Christmas night service. Mom had cooked and hosted all day long. Dad had to be at work the next morning at seven o’clock in a suit and with a smile. On Christmas night they were too pooped to pop.

So, I went to that service alone. I’d sit by myself until communion, and then as we’d begin to make our way up front, some friendly family would insist that I join them. Even as a sixteen-year-old I knew this was gracious, holy stuff. And Jesus walked up to the communion table with me. And at that table I stole a sideways glance into the smiling face of God.

But where was Jesus on the day after Christmas, and the day after that, and the day after that? If Jesus was here, he was hidden. Was I not looking hard enough? Had I not opened my heart wide enough? Had he decided to not stick around? Or, and this was a dreadful thought, had Jesus decided not to stick around with me?

This is the part of Advent that makes me most excited, most expectant. It's not that Jesus was born and we have a birthday to celebrate. That's good and wonderful. And it's not that Jesus is coming again on a donkey or a cosmic cloud at the end of time. It's that Jesus is coming soon, very soon, and mine own heart is his manger.

\* \* \*

In Cuba, I broke bread with the shepherds. These are the ones eeking out a living in a land of empty grocery stores. The cost of pork has doubled six times in three years, and is nearly non-existent. The only new vehicles on the road are the beautiful Chinese buses in which no Cuban is allowed, only tourists. Our brothers and sisters there are watching their flocks by night around campfires with meagre provision.

And they tell me the most fantastical stories: of angels, of heavenly song, of glorious delight, of a birth in the barrios of Havana. They leave their flocks and take me by the hand, their eyes shining, and introduce me to the Christ who lives among them: Jesus, the inebriated one, sleeping on the steps beneath the fountain. Jesus, the dancing one, who takes my hand and leads the line dance with joyful abandon. Jesus, the thoughtful one, hunched and praying alone in the dimly lit sanctuary. Jesus, the bus driver, waving through the window at his friends on the street corners. Jesus, the old woman, who might just be enjoying her last cigar jammed in her smiling, toothless mouth. Jesus, the women with soft hands, who cook our meals and wash our dishes. Jesus, the children, pulling at our shirts, eager to see the Americanos.

You take off your shoes because the ground is so, so holy.

\* \* \*

John the Baptist confuses us mightily splashing around at the edge of the Jordan river in Matthew's gospel. He's preaching a baptism of "repentance," which is supposed to prepare us for the one to come who baptizes with fire. John is looking above the heads of that gathered crowd, looking in every direction to the horizon, looking for the Messiah to come. He's preparing the way. You get ready by confession, by repentance, by humility, by stripping down, by washing up. John has come to prepare the way, and he's eagerly, eagerly looking.

Just like us.

We are waiting, looking, hoping for Jesus.

Could it be—and I think it is—we'll discover he was with us all along?

*While we are waiting, come . . .*  
*While we are waiting, come . . .*  
*Jesus, our Lord, Emmanuel . . .*  
*While we are waiting, come . . .*