

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

In this Advent season, a watchword is the word “prepare.” Matthew tells us this is why John the Baptist is significant. John makes his appearance in the Judean wilderness as the voice foretold by Isaiah: the “*voice of one crying in the wilderness,*” preparing “*the way of the Lord.*”

In our busy lives outside of church, in this Advent season, I’m sure there is a lot of preparing taking place. The gifts under the Christmas tree don’t just miraculously appear; being a bit circumspect here...there is no “jolly old elf” delivering them from the North Pole. The house doesn’t get decorated on its own. Christmas goodies don’t make themselves. And magic won’t make your festive Christmas dinner. All these require preparation.

You may be hosting a Christmas gathering at your home; you may be going to have holiday guests to your home. These require preparation, perhaps even a good old-fashioned house cleaning.

John came on the scene knowing that he was the one sent to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. His father Zechariah sang of it at John’s birth, and no doubt told John many times: “*you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins ...*” (Luke 1:76-77). That is, John came on the scene to give Israel a figurative house cleaning.

Figurative, because John came not to a house, but to a vineyard; and he came not with a broom and a mop, but with an axe. “*Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*”

Yes, the prophet Isaiah called Israel a vineyard (Isa. 5:1-7). The Lord Himself planted this vineyard with “*choice vines.*” And yet, this vineyard “*yielded [only] wild grapes.*” It was filled with “*briers and thorns.*” It had become a wilderness, yielding bloodshed rather than justice, an outcry rather than righteousness. It needed some serious tending.

It’s into this wilderness that John came with axe and pruning shears, preaching, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” Christ is near. Take no stock in your fleshly lineage, not Abraham, he told the Pharisees and Sadducees; not Luther, he might say to us—not even your family lineage, for “[t]hat which is born of the flesh is flesh” (John 3:6), and that wilderness voice cries out: “*All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it*” (Isa. 40:6-7).

You want to crow about something? Crow about your rebirth by water and the Spirit. Crow about being baptized with the Mightier One's baptism, a baptism not just of plain water, but a baptism by "water included in God's command and combined with God's word" (Luther, Small Catechism, Baptism part 1), making it a baptism with "*the Holy Spirit and fire,*" rejoicing that "*that which is born of the Spirit is spirit*" (John 3:6).

John came in the spirit of the Elijah of old, donning the same rustic apparel—a garment of hair and a leather belt (2 Ki. 1:8). As foretold, John came preparing the way for Him who was greater than John, for the shoot that would come forth from the stump of Jesse, the true Vine.

John came, preparing us by his preaching: "*Repent,*" and "*Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.*" Chosen by this fruitful Branch, abiding in Him and His word, we are called to bear the fruit of love. And this message is for the church, for it's the fruitful branches that are pruned, not that they be destroyed in the fire (John 15:6), but that they may "*bear more fruit*" (John 15:2).

Of course, this shoot from Jesse's stump is our Lord Jesus Christ, who stands as a signal for all peoples. Raised up upon a pole in the wilderness (John 3:14), eyes look to Him and are saved (John 6:40); nations inquire of Him and are drawn to Him (Isa. 11:10, John 12:32).

Even we Gentiles, nothing but wild shoots, are given the grace to be grafted into this Righteous Branch (Jer. 23:5). Attached to Him by baptism and faith, we find our life in Him who overcame sin and death and the grave. Abiding in Him, we bear much fruit—apart from Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). We place our hope in Him who came once to save, but who will come again, winnowing fork in hand, to judge with righteousness and with equity, to separate the wheat from the chaff, to deliver the chaff to the fires, but to bring the wheat into His eternal storehouse.

For we know that although the branch sprang forth from the root of Jesse, although the Deliverer came from Zion, and although He is called "*the King of the Jews,*" yet we know that He came not just for the Jews, but for the whole world, Jews and Gentiles alike. And we know that the covenant that He established, He established with the world, a covenant sealed as the Son shed His own blood. The covenant is the forgiveness of our sins and eternal life together with Him in His glorious resting place. God raised up this Branch and exalted Him at His right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance even to us Gentiles... and forgiveness of sins, so that, in this "*root of Jesse*" "*will the Gentiles hope.*"

Therefore, let us listen to the preaching of John the Baptist and heed his message of repentance. In all of your preparations in this holiday season, in all

your house cleaning, do some John the Baptist style cleaning; as we sang: “Then cleansed be ev’ry life from sin; Make straight the way for God within, And let us all our hearts prepare For Christ to come and enter there” (LSB345).

Prepare in this Advent season with hope in this Branch to which you have been attached by the grafting waters of Holy Baptism. Hope in this Branch as, by daily contrition and repentance, you remember your grafting and seek to live lives as His adopted children, raised up in Him. Hope in this Rose of Jesse’s lineage as today and every Lord’s day the juices that flow from Him—His very Body and Blood—surge through you, sprouts attached to the Branch of Jesse, and you bear the fruit of repentance given by Him on whom rested the Spirit of the Lord.

Hope not in yourselves, but hope in the Rose e’er blooming—not a wild bramble, but the rose of tender stem from Jesse’s lineage. And sing of Him in this season, bearing the fruit of lips that praise His name. Sing of this rose, our Savior, child of Mary, who felt our human woe; sing of our Savior, King of glory, who dost our weakness know; sing of this flower, true man, yet very God [who] from sin and death saves us. Sing and pray that through this Rose, God would bring us at length to the bright courts of heaven and into endless day (LSB359).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.