

Soldier homecoming stories are always heart-warming. A couple weeks ago it was a man whose deployment lasted a year and was scheduled to finish sometime around Christmas. At least that's what his two boys thought. A news crew was filming the kids as they watched at school a video message from him overseas saying how he couldn't wait to come home. When it was almost done the father said he couldn't wait a couple of weeks. In the video he told them to turn around. There was their dad walking into the classroom.

Think of the planning that went into that special moment. The army had to plan for his trip. He prepped by packing to go home. Then he flew around the world. His wife had to arrange with the principal and teacher to let the father have access to the school and classroom. The timing had to be just right so he was at the school when the video was playing so he would be at the right door at just the right time. All that preparing paid off though because it was a special moment with his boys.

God knew this world would need even more preparing before he sent the Savior. Time had caused too many people to lose sight of what they were waiting for. Countless people had given up on God, turned to this world and its pleasures, and rejected the idea that God would come someday to judge them. This was the world John the Baptist was sent to prepare. The gospel records the arrival of the forerunner of Jesus to...

**Prepare the way for the Lord
His coming brings renewal of life
His coming brings the end of this life**

If you're a representative of your company at a trade show or conference you can't go making all sorts of promises about what the company can do without your boss telling you it's okay. You're a representative, a messenger. The boss gives you the message, the discounts you can offer, and the promises you can make. You're obligated to the message of your superior. John the Baptist was a herald. Obligated to repeat the message entrusted to him his message was simple, **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."** Not a physical kingdom with a location. The kingdom of heaven is the kingdom of God. It's the ruling activity of God in people's hearts. The one who would bring that ruling activity was already walking in the world.

Why would John be preaching in the desert some 20 miles from the nearest big city? The crowds would've been bigger if he was closer. Except he was God's messenger preaching where God wanted him to preach. The desert was meant to illustrate the people's hearts. Not desert with no trees, flat, and sandy. Think large hills, pathways running every way but straight, and what paths there were filled with divots and holes. And when the people arrived what they heard was still more important. It sounded like practically a whole new religion. There was a tough message on sinfulness. Not only the spoken message but the surroundings too pictured their hearts which needed preparation before the Lord came to bring renewal of life.

We don't live in the desert, but it pictures your heart and mine just the same. The Baptist's call of repentance falls on our naturally deaf ears. "Why should I repent? I haven't done anything wrong. And the few things that could've been better I've worked those out. It's just a matter of balancing so I've got more volunteer hours to my name, or bigger checks to charity organizations. As long as I'm getting better each year I'll be alright. That call for repentance is for someone else, not me." Your sinful roadblock might sound different, but it's just as natural and just as dangerous. It blocks the way of the Savior.

That man in the desert isn't trying to pump himself up. **"This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: 'A voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"** John was the voice predicted by Isaiah; the all important voice that prepared the people for the Lord so they wouldn't miss the renewal of life. It would happen just days later when John pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God. John prepared the people for Jesus. His arrival impacted people's lives. **"People went out to him...confessing their sins, they were baptized."** We don't have the exact words, but whatever John said broke through the roadblocks in people's hearts and changed them from the inside out.

Listen to that voice in the desert. The Lord is preparing you for the Savior. John is telling you to turn to God in true repentance starting with confession. We turn to God not so he will turn to us as if he's waiting to see if we respond before he does anything. God has already acted. We're turning to a God who has already turned to us by grace. Repentance doesn't count volunteer hours or charity checks to be saved. Repentance recognizes in the Bible that Christ has done his work. Forgiveness is worked on the basis of a Savior who already expresses his love. His cross and empty tomb continue to tell you of the love of Christ. It's Christ's coming at Christmas that brings us a renewal of this life.

There's nothing like a cancer diagnosis, trip to the hospital, or close call on the road to remind you that this life only ends in death for us all. Doctors can try and extend life, medicines and vitamins can in natural ways try and extend life, and we can exercise and eat right too. But these only renew life for a time. Jesus' arrival renewed our lives, but only temporarily. He came once and he promises to come again. That return signals that life will change drastically someday. His second coming will bring an end to this life and the beginning of an eternal one.

The religious leaders really wanted nothing to do with John the Baptist. To them he was a nuisance taking people away from the religion that gave them so much power. But if he was attracting large crowds they should at least go and show their faces. John welcomed them harshly. **“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”** Children of the devil! That’s what John was saying to them. How did they think that they would survive judgment with such a unrepentant attitude? They didn’t even recognize themselves as sinful. They denied what baptism would give them, so John denied them baptism. Then John warned them, **“The ax is already at the root of the trees...his winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor.”** Time was running out for them and they wouldn’t escape judgment.

Time is running out for you too. Don’t deny the coming judgment or your sinfulness before God. Believing parents can’t help you. God really is going to cut down and destroy any person who doesn’t bear fruits of faith. God is serious. Has God ever lied about anything? And don’t go around thinking that God needs you in heaven. He can’t stand to not have us there, but that won’t stop him from judging you guilty of all your sins if you deny and reject his only way to save.

John had to assure the people coming out to him that he wasn’t the Savior. One far greater and more powerful was coming who was the Savior. **“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I...he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”** This one had the ability to redeem and return us to the Father. This one would die for sins. This one had blood which would remove the hypocrisy from people’s hearts and wash away the self righteousness. His baptism wouldn’t be any different than John’s which is no different than the pastor who baptized you. Whether its fire and the Holy Spirit or just plain water connected with the Word of God, it’s all by grace and it’s all because of Christ.

Today both believers and unbelievers exist side by side in the world and in the church. We still await the second coming of Christ. It’s important we stay prepared. Continue to concentrate on the message of repentance and the corresponding change in our life. Christ has forgiven us and made us ready. Now we wait anxiously and watchfully. We demonstrate strength in sufferings and walk the path of light through the darkness of this world. We avoid sin and do good. These are a small part of the life of repentance that our Savior works in our hearts.

We would be excited if someone special was coming. It’s always exciting to prepare to host a really important person. This world has hosted the most important person once already when Jesus walked this earth. He promises to come again. We should be in full preparation mode. His coming the first time secured a renewed life. His coming the second time will put an end to this life and bring those who believe in him to life everlasting. Let’s prepare the way for the Lord!