

“Your King is coming!” Few phrases in a kingdom could produce such a flurry of activity as those four words. Men called “heralds” relayed the message, messengers sent ahead by kings to prepare people for their arrival. When a herald announced “Your King is coming,” townspeople went to work. They filled in potholes and leveled bumps in roads. They cleaned and beautified. They rolled out the welcome wagon and the red carpet, to ensure that they wouldn’t offend their king.

That’s why the herald was so important. Without him, the people would be caught unprepared. For modern application, would you be prepared for your friend’s wedding if they never sent an invitation? Would you be prepared for an important business meeting if your secretary never told you she scheduled it? Messengers are vital for our preparations for someone or something important.

God understands that. Advent is all about preparation. Can we be properly prepared for Jesus’ coming--both his humble birth at Christmas, and his glorious return at Judgment Day-- without God’s messengers also heralding, “Your King is coming!”? Another way God graciously prepares us for Jesus’ coming: **God’s Messengers Prepare Us for Hope.**

From the very first gospel promise in Genesis through the prophet Malachi, God sent countless messengers to prepare people for their Savior. But one particular messenger, John the Baptist, holds special distinction. Every other messenger pointed a vague finger into the future and declared, “Your king will come.” John the Baptist point directly at Jesus and declared, “Your king is here.”

God had chosen John to be the forerunner of Jesus, long before his miraculous birth to Mary’s barren cousin Elizabeth and her aged husband Zechariah. An angel prophesied about their unborn son, ***“He will go on before the Lord...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*** John would be God’s messenger to prepare the people for hope.

Mark begins his ***“gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God”*** by talking about John. Why? Because John is evidence that Jesus is the Son of God. Mark connects John the Baptist to two prophecies: one by Malachi 400 years before John’s birth, and another by Isaiah 700 years earlier. ***“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” “A voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.”***

Isaiah and Malachi prophesied about the herald who would prepare the way for the Savior. Both prophecies sound like snapshots of John the Baptist, who prepared the way for...Jesus. Jesus, God’s own Son!

John’s ministry also pointed to two things: first, the certainty of Christ’s coming. Herald’s weren’t sent to alert people, “The King might possibly be coming, maybe, I think.” Herald’s only announced, “Your King’s coming” if they were certain. Christ’s coming was certain.

Second, John’s ministry shows the importance of Christ’s coming. No one runs ahead and shouts, “Pastor Schreiner is coming!” when I go to Aldi. Even if someone did, few would care! Herald’s only announce and prepare the way for the extremely important people.

That was John’s God-given calling: prepare people for the arrival of THE most important person. And there were plenty of people to prepare! ***“The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.”*** This wasn’t a leisurely stroll down the block. People had to travel 20 miles downhill into a harsh, desert wilderness, and 20 miles back uphill on their return. Why did they go to so much trouble to see this

camel's hair-wearing, bug-eating prophet, when we sometimes struggle to drive 5 miles in heated SUVs to church?

They came because John proclaimed God's message. For 400 years, God had remained silent, but now, here again was a legit prophet of God!

"And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Basically, John's sermon to prepare the people for the Savior's coming had two focuses: Repentance and Hope.

Preparing for the Savior didn't mean outward activities like hanging lights and baking cookies. People needed to prepare internally, to get their hearts right and ***"make straight paths for"*** the Savior.

First, John preached the law, warning, ***"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."***

John warned them that like his desert home, their hearts were dry with sin and unbelief. The King was coming, and it wasn't their roads that needed repair, but their hearts—filled with potholes of sin and roadblocks of self-righteousness. They thought they'd be saved because of their Jewish ancestry. They believed they could save themselves by strictly following Jewish law. But that road was leading away from the Savior, not towards him. They needed to repent.

You might say repentance is like a U-turn, a 180° change of mind and heart about sin. Repentance means you stop loving your sin and start hating it; you stop seeing sin as desirable, and start seeing sin as despicable; you stop clinging to self-righteousness, and acknowledge your self-hopelessness.

In order to prepare our hearts for our Savior's coming, we too need to repent, and turn away from our sin. But it's really easy to make the U-Turn of my repentance into a traffic circle, isn't it? When I'm cut by the law and confess my sin, in repentance I follow the curve and start making the U-Turn, putting sin in my rearview mirror. Fruits of repentance would mean I continue on that path away from sin. However, Satan tempts us to continue following the curve and get right back on the same sinful road we started on.

Today, we confessed our sins, admitted our guilt. We expressed repentance, and start U-turning. But how many of us will leave church and fall back into the same sin we just repented of? One day you feel ashamed over your sin; the next day, your calloused, sin-warped conscience feels no pain.

Yes, to prepare for Christ's coming, we need to repent and turn away from sin; to clear away the roadblocks of sin that are barriers to our faith and worship. We need to repent every day! But if that's the entire message, it'd be a message of hopelessness, because our sinful natures lead us right back into sin, even after we've repented in sorrow and frustration; even when we feel sick that we fell again.

That's why John's message wasn't just "Repent!" He preached ***"a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."***

Negative feelings toward sin fall short. We need forgiveness, not just sadness. The Israelites arid, sinful, self-righteous hearts needed to be quenched with the forgiving waters of baptism! Last week, we heard how Baptism prepares us for Jesus' coming as the Spirit works through Word and water to bring us to faith, and wash our sins away. And that's why John urged a baptism of repentance. ***"Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River."*** Cut by the law and their guilt, they confessed and repented. But they

weren't just left in sorrow. They were connected through baptism to the forgiveness that Christ came to win for them!

That's how we prepare our hearts too; by focusing on Christ, and what he came to do. The townspeople and villagers weren't excited because the herald arrived in their city. They were excited and took action to prepare, because the herald was a forerunner of the King, and the King was coming.

God's messengers prepare us for hope, because they point us not to themselves, but to the greater one who is coming. John downplayed himself as one unworthy of slave labor, because he knew that the truly great one was still coming. ***"After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."***

First, John preached the people's need for repentance and baptism. But then he showed them the gospel, the message of hope, pointing to the source of their forgiveness in repentance and baptism. The Savior King was coming, to win forgiveness and salvation for the world.

Without Christ, the message of repentance is just a hopeless circle of relapse and failure. No matter how much I hate my sins, I can't get rid of them myself. Without Christ, I have no motivation to turn away from my sin. ***"Repentance is not a work that we perform, but a gift that Christ gives. It's not an emotion that we stir up within ourselves, but a motion that Christ enacts within us—away from guilt and self-devised methods of atonement, and toward Jesus."*** (Chad Bird)

Without Christ, no matter how often I drench myself in baptismal waters, it's just a bath. But that's why the messengers are so important for our preparation, because they point us to Christ through God's Word! And through that Word, the Spirit creates faith, strengthens faith, and produces true repentance. In that saving faith and repentance, God has fully prepared us to meet our Savior—the humble baby born in Bethlehem, who will come again in glory!

We thank God for the messengers he's sent to prepare us for our King's coming through the Word! Heralds like John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Lamb of God. Messengers like pastors, teachers, and parents who have joyfully pointed us to Jesus. Messengers like...you, sent with a message to prepare people's hearts.

When a herald rode up and announced, "Your king is coming," I bet the people didn't keep it to themselves. That message set off a flurry of activity, neighbors passing along the message, "Be prepared! The King's coming!" As the herald once again relays the message, "Your King is coming!" to prepare your heart, I pray that you will joyfully pass along that message to prepare your neighbors' hearts also.

To equip you for your heralding, you'll find a postcard invitation for our Christmas services in each of your mailboxes. Take it home, but don't let it sit on your counter until 2018! Use it to invite someone to come with you to be filled with the hope that is theirs in Christ. If you prefer something digital, share our Facebook post about the services on your timeline; message it to your friends; tag them in your post.

Whether somewhere in the desert, or on your Facebook page, you're God's herald! Prepare yours and others hearts to meet him-- with hope and joy. "Your King is coming!"