

“Ready or Not—Here He Comes!”—Matthew 3:11-12

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Ready or Not—Here He Comes!”, is Matthew 3:11-12 → *I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come One Who is more powerful than I, Whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor, gathering His wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.*” This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

When I was a child I enjoyed playing many games with the other kids in the neighborhood. One game which was played quite often was “Hide-And-Go-Seek.” After the person who was “it” finished counting to twenty he would yell really loud: “Ready or not! Here I come!” At that point he’d start looking for everyone else as they were hiding from his presence. “Ready” meant that we should have hidden ourselves in such a manner that he could not find us.

I wonder if that isn’t the same concept with which people function when it comes to their relationship with God. They keep running away from Him, trying to hide from Him and purposely avoiding those people, situations or places where they have to encounter Him. It’s kind of like

playing “Hide-And-**God**-Seek.” Sin, along with its accompanying guilt, strives to separate you from God eternally.

It is for this reason that **God comes to us** to save us in the Person & Work of Jesus Christ. During the Advent season we focus on the coming of Christ into our lives in various ways. It would be natural to think of the coming of Christ with His birth in Bethlehem since the Advent season immediately precedes Christmas. Advent also focuses on the 2nd Coming of Jesus to take us to be with Him in heaven on the Last Day. Advent also could refer to the many ways in which Jesus entered peoples’ lives during His earthly ministry.

Our text deals with the coming of Christ at the beginning of His earthly public ministry to fulfill our salvation. This advent of the Messiah into His public ministry was prefaced with the ministry of His cousin, John the Baptizer, *preaching in the wilderness* (cf. Matthew 3:1). Seems strange that John would preach *in the wilderness*, doesn’t it? Many evangelists would say that if you wanted to reach the most people you’d go to the most populated areas, such as the villages, towns and cities, not the desert.

John’s “proclaiming context” was determined by two factors: His mission and his message. His mission was determined by Yahweh about 700 years before he preached. *The prophet Isaiah* referred to him as a *voice* crying out for people to *prepare the way for the LORD . . . in the*

wilderness (cf. Isaiah 40:3). John preached *in the wilderness* in fulfillment of this prophecy. It was in *the wilderness of Judea* because this was where Yahweh's people resided, whom John was supposed to *prepare* to meet the Messiah. This was his mission.

His message? *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand* (cf. Matthew 3:2). News of the coming of *the kingdom of heaven* was exciting news to the Jew of John's day. The LORD was finally coming to deliver His people and establish His kingdom among them again. It's almost as if John was saying, "Ready or not! Here **He** comes!" In this case, the people are not running to hide but rather were going to him to be *baptized by him in the Jordan River* as they confessed *their sins* (cf. Matthew 3:5-6). They looked forward to God coming into their lives. They had been prepared to recognize his message because they knew of God's promises in the Old Testament Scriptures.

Preparation for the coming of the Christ (i.e. the Messiah) and His *kingdom* is bound up with repentance. Repentance is an attitude of the heart which reflects itself in the actions of your life. This explains John's rather "abrasive" approach with *many of the Pharisees and Sadducees*. In their hypocrisy they insisted on proper outward actions and motions without concern for inward change of heart and faith. What need is there for repentance when you are God's chosen people? This is why he said to them in Matthew 3:9 → *Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We*

*have Abraham as our father,” for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Without repentance the coming of the Messiah brings God’s wrath upon your sin. You cannot simply go through the motions of being baptized without a repentant heart and then think that you are prepared to meet the Christ. It would be like encountering a Christian who claims the benefits of baptism without actions which accompany baptism and display a new life in Jesus. John described it as *fruit in keeping with repentance* (cf. Matthew 3:8).*

Thus, a new behavior will naturally flow from the baptized. Luke records John’s advice to those desiring to produce this fruit in Luke 3:10-14. *When the crowds asked Him what to do He told those who had two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise. He told the tax collectors to collect no more than they were authorized to do. He told the soldiers . . . not to extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with their wages. He provided practical examples of how repentance will turn you around and go in a different direction of obedience to the Lord as a fruit of faith in the midst of your daily vocations of life.*

It is important to remember that Jesus’ coming was not dependent upon the peoples’ reactions or responses to John’s preaching. This was happening on the basis of **God’s initiative**, not John’s. God sent Jesus because He saw our eternally helpless condition in sin and our need for

forgiveness. He came for both the people who responded to John's preaching by confessing their sins and being baptized as well as for the hypocritical religious leaders who reacted against His coming. **Christ came to fulfill God's redemptive work so that all people can receive the forgiveness He wants them to have.** He wants them to be found in His grace.

All this was happening according to God's timing, plan and purpose. Galatians 4:4-5 says: *When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.* This was God's appointed *time* no matter how "ready" anybody was to meet Jesus. John could have truly said, "Ready or not! Here **He** comes!" John was placed there by divine intervention (cf. Luke 1:5-25) because God wanted them to be ready. *God desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth* (i.e. faith in Jesus Christ) (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4).

Are you ready to meet Jesus when He comes into your life? Hebrews 9:28 says that Christ was *offered once to bear the sins of many and will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save **those who are eagerly waiting for Him.*** Are you *eagerly waiting for Him* or are you running to hide from Him? No sinner (i.e. every member of the human

race) is exempt from the righteous wrath of God. Likewise, no sinner is exempt from the grace of God held out in the Person & Work of Jesus Christ. Based upon His accomplishing all that is necessary for your salvation, Jesus also says to you, *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand* (cf. Matthew 4:17)

As Christians we know both the wrath of God as well as the grace of God, demonstrated in the Person & Work of Jesus on our behalf. John's example in verse 12 of our text of the *winnowing fork* of Jesus being *in His hand to clear His threshing floor, gathering His wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire*, is a picture of God's judgment upon sin. *His wheat* are those who trust in the judgment upon their sin placed on Jesus in His atoning work. *The chaff* are those who refuse to trust in the atoning work of Jesus, thus taking that judgment upon themselves eternally.

You can know, experience and rely on this grace because you have the privilege to live on the other side of the benefits of John's ministry. We live in the fulfillment of John's words in verse 11 of our text: *He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire*. When you are *born of water and the Spirit* (cf. John 3:5) you are empowered by the Holy Spirit to always be ready for Christ's coming into your life on the Last Day as you live a repentant life each and every day. You don't have to hide from God because you fear His wrath. Rather, you go to meet Him in His Word

and Sacraments with anticipation, joy and eagerness.

“Ready or not, here **He** comes?” The LORD makes you ready through the Person & Work of Jesus Christ and keeps you ready by the power of His Holy Spirit. Likewise, you display your readiness in actions, the *fruit* of faith which gives witness to others of the Person & Work of Jesus **for them as well**. Ready or not, He will come again and He wants all people to be among those who respond: *Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!* (cf. Revelation 22:20)

*It is God Who establishes us with you in Christ,
and has anointed us,
and Who has also put His seal on us
and given us His Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.*
(2 Corinthians 1:21-22)

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