

Prepare the way!

As a young child my anticipation intensified as the time approached to go to my grandparents in Chicago for Christmas.



Michael Olmsted

Grandmother's unusual nativity scene included a lot more than most. It included sheep, cows, chickens, ducks, kittens, and puppies alongside the familiar camels and donkey. I would lay on my stomach and rearrange the figures that surrounded baby Jesus. That was my introduction to the magic called Christmas.

The dramatic appearance of John the Baptizer is a startling announcement that God's promised Messiah has come. John was an arresting wilderness figure, dressed in a garment of camel's hair and girded with a leather belt. He represented a culture which contrasted with the established Jerusalem culture. Even his diet, grasshoppers and wild honey, is bizarre. People easily identified John with the prophet Elijah.

Crowds came from everywhere to see and hear this wild man from the desert area southwest of the Dead Sea. They had waited a long time for Messiah and they were ready for God's kingdom to come into their dreary world. The time was not unlike our own, with its political and religious conflicts that offered only hopelessness and fear. John's preaching not only offered hope, it did so in a blatant rebuttal of the religious power block in Jerusalem. John did not enjoy the support of the high priest. He publicly antagonized the Pharisees and Sadducees by calling them "children of snakes" and taunting them with "Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon?" (v. 7).

John's preaching sounded one essential note: the end is near, so you had better repent. He cleared away the predominant religious thinking that being the children of Abraham was a free ticket to blessing and God's

kingdom with the words, "God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones" (v. 9). The underlying idea for this necessary repentance is that being a child of God involves a relationship instead of religious rule keeping and temple rituals.

We must pause and consider the meaning of repent," which is deeper than regret for an action or attitude. Repent means to travel a new path, give up the old harmful routine life for a new life that involves more than safety, prosperity and humanly created religious structures. John specifies that any true change of heart must "produce fruit" that is a visible change in daily living (v. 8). If his hearers found John's words frightening they must understand that "the one coming after (him)" will separate "the wheat from the husks (and)...clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into the barn... but he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out" (v. 12). Hardly a popular positive message!

During my last college pastorate, a university student called me one day to ask if I would baptize her. She explained that she was a "spiritual" person and had decided that she needed to do this. When could she come by to be baptized? Further discussion revealed that she had no particular beliefs and did not attend any church. I explained that baptism should be the result of personal belief in Christ, a desire to follow him and would be performed before a congregation of witnesses. She suggested that two of her friends could come with her as witnesses some afternoon. Obviously we were not on the same level of understanding.

The religious leaders who approached John did not understand his message or the meaning of the coming Messiah. God is not a captive of our ideas or traditions. Sometimes we mistakenly treat baptism as the gateway to church membership, the expunging of our past, the guarantee

Formations

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Scripture: Matthew 3:1-12

we will get into heaven. John's baptism was a symbolic surrender of life to God, preparation for the coming Messiah and a desire to live differently. New Testament baptism is a declaration of belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus, a testimony that from that moment we seek to live as a child of God, it is the beginning of a new resurrection life.

John also makes it very clear that he is the announcing voice, not the promised Messiah. His baptism is one of repentance, but the one (Christ) who comes after him will baptize with the fire of purification and the Holy Spirit (vv. 11-12). John describes himself as not even worthy to assume the lowliest servant role of untying Jesus' sandals. John's baptism is about preparing for Messiah's appearing, but New Testament baptism is a picture of our new life created by God's grace.

As advent begins, focus on how "new" your life is in Christ. As a child every year at Christmas I rediscovered the wonderful truth of Jesus' coming into my world of puppies and kittens. Perhaps that is why I have always understood (like John the Baptizer) that spiritual life is expressed in how we live in the real world.

John invited all people into God's kingdom. He baptized people who were not acceptable to religious leaders and were certainly outsiders to the establishment. Our calling is not much different from John's. We are to point people to the Son of God, offering them hope of grace and a new life. It is not about us and our religious structures and customs. The real celebration of Jesus' coming is to tell the world the Savior has come and he is coming again. Prepare the way!

Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.