

✠ Matthew 3:1-12 ✠

IN NOMINE IESU

John the Baptist's season of Advent looked much different than ours. He did not spend his Advent season shopping for Christmas gifts or preparing for family and holiday festivities. He did not spend his Advent season decorating his house or volunteering at soup kitchens. He spent his Advent season in the wilderness. He spent his Advent season making powerful enemies who would eventually take from him his head. He spent his time eating locust and wild honey, preaching repentance.

It does not take a Sherlock Holmes to see that there is a big difference between John the Baptist's season of Advent and ours. But the difference does not lie in the commercialization of Christmas. For in John's day people were selling and buying their goods and wares even in the temple, no less. Herod sat in his palace adorned with the finest of linens and gold. The people wasted their money on useless trinkets and gadgets of the latest fad just as we do. Else the Baptizer would not have found it necessary to warn the tax collectors to not take more than they are authorized and for soldiers to be content with their wages. How much of our time is consumed by self-indulgent daydreams of somehow, honestly or not, falling into a windfall of money at Christmas time, or any other time for that matter? How often do we wonder why the Lord doesn't provide, when all the while He abundantly gives us locust and wild honey?

John's season of Advent was just as commercially driven as ours. Neither does the difference lie in what was expected. If shopping malls and Wal-Mart have commercialized Advent and Christmas, there is still lurking in the background the reason for the season. Even among all the lights and mistletoe, you can glimpse the occasional manger scene or brightly lit star, or hear piped through the Home Depot's speaker system, "Peace on Earth, Good Will Toward Men." St. John awaited the coming of the Messiah just as we, in Advent, look forward to celebrating Christmas and the second coming of our Lord. Even if it is hidden among all the holiday trappings, the reason for the season is the same.

The difference between St. John the Baptist's season of Advent and ours lies not in commercialization or reasons for the season, but in postures. John's and ours. For John did not simply spend his time in the wilderness eating odd food and preaching fiery sermons of repentance. He spent his time in quiet meditation. Like his brother prophets before him, John did not seek the people out; they sought him out. He did not force himself on anyone but rather waited until they came to him. And when they came, poor and meek or rich and proud, the message was always the same: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Prepare ye the way."

And God is gracious, He gives us prophets and preachers to remind us of who we are and what we're about. The Holy Spirit has given us something beautiful in His Church. He has given us the tradition of Adventtide, when He concentrates our thoughts on John the Baptist, when we would otherwise be engaged in gingerbread houses and Christmas cookies and jolly old St. Nick.

While we will struggle and fuss over how to shed the holiday pounds, John ate locust and wild honey. While we debate over which present to get our favorite nephew, John debated with king Herod over God's Law. While we sit in front of the boob-tube (aptly named, by the way), whiling our hours away in a hypnotic trance over football games and Christmas specials, John sat wondering when he would loose his life for the kingdom of God, and so gain his life.

Among those born of women, there has never arisen one greater than John the Baptist. Yet we avoid imitating him at all costs. If we have not wholly lost the reason for the season of Christmas, I fear we have lost the reason for the season of Advent. Prepare ye the way, make straight His paths. Thus he came preaching and baptizing unto repentance.

But how does one go about preparing the way of the Lord? How does one come to the place where he says, "I am prepared, I have done what is required, I have set myself up for the coming of the Lord, for the theophany of God"? Such is the question of those who came to Jesus and asked Him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

They were asking Him, "If your disciples are not fasting, then what are your disciples doing to prepare themselves for the coming of the Root of Jesse?" The answer is quite simple really. They were feasting with the Bridegroom. What does a guest do to prepare himself for the party? Nothing until he has been invited. And then, upon receiving the invitation he goes about making preparations for the party. He buys new clothes or at least rents a tux. He goes and gets a haircut and shines his shoes. He goes out and buys a gift and wraps it in beautiful paper and puts a personalized card on it. He makes himself ready for the party not by inviting himself but by honoring the invitation and thereby honoring the Master of the party.

But all of that is not true preparation. All the pomp that goes along with preparing one's self to attend a great banquet is extra, it's unneeded. The invitation is what prepares one for the party. You can dance and sing all you want for an invite to the King's dinner table, but nothing you can do can make Him give you an invitation. He doesn't care how good you've been or how naughty you are. He doesn't care if you've said please or thank you. He doesn't care if you've read your Bible and tried to be neighborly. None of that is the reason for Him inviting you. Nothing you have done has caused God to look upon you with favor. You have not earned God's love.

Rather He loves you because of Himself. He loves you because He wants to love you and is able to love you even when you don't love Him. You have been invited to the feast. Not by anything you have done, but simply because the Son of God, the Eternal Word, joined Himself to our flesh. He did not ask your permission to be born of Mary. He did not ask if you wanted Him to come into your life and so invite you to be with Him in His kingdom. He is not one who waits for you to decide if He is your God. He tells you He is your God by becoming one of us.

So how do you prepare yourself for the coming of the Lord, for the Advent of our King? By repenting, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Such repentance does not earn you an invitation to the feast, the invitation is in the Infant Priest born in a manger in Bethlehem. Rather, such repentance is like getting your haircut, shining your shoes, owning up to the fact that you have been invited.

Let us recapture the reason for the season of Advent. Let us prepare the way of the Lord by fasting from the indulgences of the flesh and over indulging yourself on the things of God.

Listen to God's Word, attend His preaching, confess your sins, read the Christmas story, sing Christmas Carols, and eat the food of God, not locust and wild honey, but His body and blood.

The King has come. The Messiah has been born. The Promised Seed has come into the world to save the world from sin and death, guilt and shame.

In the name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT.

✠ AMEN ✠