Matthew 3:3 3Yes, this is he of whom this was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.”

 Honestly, I don’t know if you could ever do an Advent series and not make reference to John the Baptist and the unique role he played in the coming of Jesus. Now remember, though John is responsible for preparing people for the first coming of Jesus it is very evident that as John is doing his work he thoroughly understands the eternal implications of Jesus’ coming, meaning that John ends up also preparing souls for the second coming of Jesus! He is such a fascinating man, with a unique role to play in this unveiling of the plan of God for the salvation of the world. Our theme for today will be: **PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD!**

 If you would, let’s begin our discussion of John’s work by taking a closer look at John himself. It is in looking closer at the life of John that we can see how he became such a successful preacher that drew thousands of people into the wilderness to hear him. You really didn’t think it was just John’s clothing and his diet that attracted people, did you? Nope, it was his preaching. It was what he said and how he said it that brought people out to him. And yet, at the same time, it is John’s preaching that will eventually lead him into great trouble. Yes, we can rightly say that John’s preaching cost him his head!

 Please recall that we know who John’s mother and father are. His mother’s name is Elizabeth, some sort of relative to young Mary, the mother of Jesus. His father’s name was Zechariah, a member of the priestly division of Abijah. The most important thing in this is to remember that John would have been of priestly descent. That means that in his childhood, John was being prepared to do exactly what his father did, serve in the Temple, serve as a priest of the Old Testament, yes, John was being prepared to serve the Lord! But somewhere along the line, John was motivated and moved by the Holy Spirit to leave that role and take on the specific role God had prepared for him.

 What all of that means is that John knew, and knew very well, the priestly rulers, authorities and leadership of the Jewish people! He had been raised with them. He went to school with them. He had been schooled in all the finer points of the Jewish priesthood in the same manner as Annas, Caiaphas, and all the other priestly rulers of Jesus day. But one thing distinguished John. That one thing is mentioned in the Gospel of Luke. That one thing is told to Zechariah by the angel who announced John’s birth. That angel clearly reveals: **“He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. He will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn hearts of the fathers to the children, to turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to prepare a people who are ready for the Lord.”**

 It is those words that I believe tell us how John ended up in the wilderness. John was filled with the Holy Spirit. John understood the truth and wonder of God’s Holy and revealed Word. I can only imagine the challenge John presented to his priestly instructors, to those who wanted to make the ministry of the Temple a work righteous thing or to those who ignored the reality of sin and damnation and instead proclaimed a wimpy, don’t worry about him God because after all you are the Jewish people. John would have grasped the truth of the sacrifices and the Law. John would have understood the salvation that God was planning through the Savior to come, foreshadowed in everything the priests of the Temple were doing but that the last 400 years of priests had been ignoring. John, knew firsthand about the false teaching, the hypocrisy and the factual unbelief of his fellow priests. He had lived and trained with them. When the time was right, the Holy Spirit moved John to the wilderness and there, in spectacular fashion, John began his message of sin and repentance, a message that was preparing hearts for the Lord! And yep, all of this happened just as Isaiah had foretold.

 I can understand why so many people went out to hear John preach. This guy preached the horror and reality of sin. What he said made sense. He spoke of how the sacrifices of the Temple pointed to the real Savior that God would send. He spoke of the Lamb of God that would take away the sin of the world. He spoke of the importance of faith for salvation, not the keeping of the law, because John made it clear that keeping the law was not possible. And the sacrifices happening at the Temple weren’t saving you either if all you believed is that the sacrifices were you showing God how much you cared as you won God’s favor by your obedience. You get all of that just by thinking of the main message of John.

 John’s main message is **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”** Repent is a word that basically means “change your mind!” John was calling upon the people to think and view sin in a different way. They had been taught that sin was nothing more than a simple lack of disobedience to the Lord. The only implication for sin that they taught was that if you lived in sin, God would make your life hard and difficult. Your life, according to the Jewish religion, was to be one of obedience and it was also taught that a life of obedience is one that God rewarded with goods and blessings and abundance. Sorry, that’s how work righteousness works. Be really good and God will bless you. Be a sinner and God will make your life hard. Now I don’t know about all of you, but if I were to measure my own life in this way, I am going to tell you that I need lots and lots, greater and more loving obedience to God in my life. Because if the measure of my spiritual life is my physical blessings, well, at best I am middle class which means I am merely a middle of the road, might be pleasing God kind of soul. On that basis, I am in trouble.

 But John preaches that everyone is in trouble. Everyone is a sinner who needs to repent and needs to turn his attention to the promised Savior. John’s advantage is that he can also proclaim that the Savior is near. In other words, everything the Jewish faith is about is about to come true and be fulfilled because the Christ of God is at hand. No wonder people flocked to hear John. His message was so different. His message was about God’s grace soon to be realized in the Savior to be revealed!

 Let’s look a little closer of some of what Matthew tells us John preached. Of course, there is the base message, “Repent” change your mind about sin. It is not just about this world, but rather it is about the world to come. We can see that in various verses here: **“who warned you to flee from the coming wrath…the axe is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire…His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”**

 Clearly John considers sin to be damnable. Clearly John understands what has yet to be taught by Jesus, **“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”** Clearly John understands that Jesus is and will be the ultimate judge of absolutely everything! I don’t know if John got exactly how all of this would happen in Jesus but by the time is it all said and done it is clear that John understands already at the baptism of Jesus that Jesus was the Son of God, the fulfiller of God’s promises, the Lamb of God who was going to be the difference in everything.

 You can see that truth in contemplating a few of the other statements of John that Matthew shares with us. For instance: **“Therefore, produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”** What a great truth of God. **“Repentance,”** that idea of “changing your mind” speaks to us of a changed life. I try to illustrate this truth in this way. You can’t say, “I am sorry,” and yet continue in the sin. If I slap you and say I am sorry but continue to slap you anyway, is there really sorrow? Where this becomes harder for us is in the fact that all of us to one degree or another are very repetitious in our sins. We say we are sorry but we keep repeating that sin. I would tell you, that to just repeat and repeat as if it is your right to sin, then that is unbelief. But as we live our lives in Christ, we have a different attitude toward sin. Our sins bother us, they weigh on us and though we may repeat, there is an agony of soul going on. Eventually, (I speak from experience), God will help us overcome and win the victory in Jesus. That is the life of repentance that we lead. Or again as I say, “Sin, repent. Sin, repent.” But with Jesus’ help we get better at this struggle in life. Soon it is sin, repent……………sin, repent. Our lives, with Jesus’ help, guide us to hate sin and lead lives of good works to the glory of God the Father. These words help us to grasp that Christianity is never a stagnate kind of thing, but is always a growing and maturing thing. A tree that has stopped growing is a tree that has stopped producing fruit and is a tree that is dying.

 Here’s another statement where clearly John is telling us that the Lamb of God is going to be the big difference. John says, **“I baptize you with water for repentance. But the one who comes after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”** What wonderful words these are. First, I want to point out that in Scripture, not once did John ever speak of his baptism without saying **“I baptize you with water.”** The word “baptize” means to apply water. So why speak like this, “I apply water with water?” John was telling us that his baptism was nothing more than a water baptism, a ritual toward repentance. But look what he tells you will happen with the Savior. **“He will baptize with the Holy Spirit.”** That means that Jesus’ baptism will be a means of grace, that means by which God offers and gives the forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation. Jesus’ baptism carries the power and wonder of the Holy Spirit!

 And note what else. Jesus’ baptism brings fire. Now I suppose we could simply say that was a reference to the gift of fire at Pentecost and that would be fine. But in the context in which the word is used I think it means something else. The Holy Spirit is given in Jesus’ baptism. Baptism cleanses us from our sins as the word of God clearly testifies. Fire in that day and age, is a cleansing agent. John is telling us that Jesus’ baptism will result in cleansing, in being forgiven and becoming heirs of eternal life. Wow! That is exactly what baptism is! Or the other possibility is that the word “fire” here is meant to convey the idea of zealousness, the idea of “being on fire” for Jesus. Either way, the baptism of Jesus is going to be life changing in every way.

 How else will things be totally different in Jesus? Look at the lesson found in the words: **“He will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”** Here is Jesus the ruler and judge of all. It is clear that eternity, the idea of heaven and hell as eternal destinations is being spoken of. And what will be the difference between the two? You and me? No, Jesus! In this verse it is Jesus doing all the action. He gathers the wheat. He is the Lord of the harvest. He has the barn and on and on. All the work is done by Jesus. I don’t know if John understood or not that he was already preaching salvation by grace through faith, but that’s what is going on here. And if you are going to try and say that the wheat had some role in all of this what would that be? “I the wheat plowed?” “I the wheat planted myself.” “I the wheat caused the rain I needed.” “I the wheat commanded the harvesters to come and get me.” It gets pretty silly to think that way. Jesus is the one who does all the action here. And His actions will simply be dependent on whether or not you have the faith that He gave you in the first place. You will even be wheat because of Jesus.

 But the chaff? That chaff is going to be burned up. But pay attention because I want you to grasp that the fire is called “unquenchable fire” That means it is a never ending fire. It’s just not a good picture to think about. And, did you catch as I did that wonderful play of words that John uses here. Jesus brings the Holy Spirit and fire…faith and zeal, but the chaff ends up burned up with unquenchable fire, here is unbelief and judgment!

 So it is then that John introduces us to the coming of Jesus. That was his job. Jesus is coming. Eventually it will be: Jesus is here! I will leave you with the same wonder and hope as John. Prepare! Get ready for the Lord. Keep that faith straight. Jesus is coming! Amen.