

December 4, 2022 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Jesus is Coming as Judge

John pleads with us to be prepared

John points us to what is prepared

“Repent!” John had all the grace of a bull in a china shop. He was blunt and to the point. He did not waste time with polite conversation about how people felt or what the weather was like. It wasn’t that he did not care about people. It’s that he REALLY cared about people. He knew that more than anything else, people needed to be in a good relationship with God and that they might stand before God at any moment. . When John thought about the promised Messiah, he did not think of a cute kid cradled in his mother’s arms. He thought of lumberjack lining up his ax at the trunk of a tree that was not producing fruit. When the Messiah came, those people who are holding on to their sin would be cast away from God’s blessings forever, like a lumberjack would cut down a dead tree and throw it into the fire. John knew that Jesus is coming as a judge. He pleads with us to be prepared and he points us to what is prepared.

John pleads with us to be prepared

I like to imagine that aged Zechariah read Isaiah 11:2 to his young son, John and told him that it referred to the promised Messiah. **“The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord.”** I like to imagine Zechariah explained to John that Isaiah 11:2 proved that the Messiah would be true God and that he and the Holy Spirit would be connected. He would know everything. Later, when John baptized Jesus and the Holy Spirit descended over Jesus in the form of a dove, John must have smiled and thought that things were happening just as God said they would.

In verses 3 and 4, Isaiah explained that the promised Messiah, **“will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.”** When Jesus comes as judge, he will not make his decisions based on mere outward appearances. He can see through the surface of things and penetrate to the heart of a matter in determining justice. He will not be fooled by someone who dresses up nice and gets to church every week and gives a healthy offering but is just going through the motions. He will know if someone is

truly sorry for his sins and asking for God’s forgiveness or if he is just reading the words in the bulletin. For that matter, he knows if the pastor is just mailing it in or if I have preached the sermon to myself first. Jesus will not be impressed if you or your parents or grandparents are lifelong Lutherans. He knows which websites you’ve been to even though others don’t. He knows if you use his name to praise him here at church, but use his name in bad ways throughout the week. Jesus, the judge, will not be fooled.

All of this leads to the grand conclusion in the second half of verse 4, **“He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.”** Certainly, God is loving. We never want to forget that. But he is also just. Those who reject him will condemn themselves to living without the blessings he came to give. Our National Park Service has an army of firefighters, specially trained forces who are prepared to go anywhere in the country to contain and control fires in our national parks. It’s quite an amazing network of helicopters, bulldozers, chainsaws, and highly professional people who live on adrenaline and are willing to risk their lives in order to save others. Part of their standard equipment is a fire shelter. When it’s folded up, it’s about the size of a brick, but when it’s opened, it looks like a large baked potato wrapped in aluminum foil. In fact, the outer layer is aluminum foil. Other layers are made of woven silica and fiberglass. When the fire surges too fast for the firefighters to escape, the fire shelter not only protects them from the fire but also traps breathable air. Jesus is our fire shelter from the fire of God’s judgement. To reject Jesus is as deadly as a firefighter refusing to use his fire shelter. Jesus came to save everyone, but if they reject him, then he can not help them. Mr. Bull-in-the-china-shop John pleads with us, **“Repent! Look at yourself. Sin is not just something you do once in a while. It is what you are. You are in trouble. The flames of judgement are coming. Take shelter in Jesus”**

As John looked at the Jewish nation, he saw a skeleton of a once proud and powerful people. Under Kings David and Solomon the Jews controlled all major trade routes and had an army that never lost. Now they were just a blip on the radar screen and were under the iron fist of the Romans. Maybe you’ve felt that way at times, maybe even now. Maybe you feel that your glory days are gone. Maybe you feel small and insignificant. Maybe you feel that nobody really cares about you as a person, or that they only care about you for what you can do for them as they use you and take advantage of you. Instead of feeling strong and sturdy, maybe you feel tired and burned out.

Instead of a forest of strong oak trees, when John looked at the Jewish nation, he saw what looked like a field of burned stumps. And yet from one of those stumps, he saw a green twig growing. Verse 1, “**A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.**” Jesse was the father of King David, and King David was the ancestor of Jesus. Jesus was even born in Bethlehem, the hometown of King David. Through Isaiah’s prophecy here in chapter 11, John could see that Jesus was coming.

Jesus, the tree from the stump of Jesse, would take away our sin by being nailed to another tree. It was Pilate’s pronouncement that put Jesus on that path to the cross; and it was the soldier’s nails that pinned his body to the cross; but it was God’s just anger over your sins and mine that punished Jesus as he hung on that cross. We are the ones who rebelled against God and did what we were not supposed to do. We are the ones who ruined our relationship with God. We were the ones who sinned. Yet, Jesus stood between God’s just anger and us. He took the punishment we deserved. And with his dying gasp he told you, “It is finished.” It’s done. Your sin is paid for. Your guilt is gone. You are forgiven. You will not die, but live forever in heaven.

As Isaiah continued his description of the coming Messiah, he said (:5), “**Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.**” Think of a king or a general in his dress uniform with a sash, a decorative strip of cloth, stretched across his chest. Jesus is announcing that he represents righteousness and faithfulness. He is righteous and faithful, perfect in every way. He came to give righteousness and faithfulness to you. In exchange for your sins that he took away from you, he gave you his righteousness and faithfulness. He lived a perfect life keeping every commandment for you so that, when you stand before God the Judge and he asks you, “You have kept each commandment perfectly in thought, word and action?” you can say, “Yes, in the person of Jesus Christ, my substitute and Savior.” Because of Jesus, God declares you to be righteous and faithful. You can trust him. You have already been saved.

As John pleads with us to be prepared for the moment when we stand before Jesus as our Judge, he also points us to what is prepared for us.

John points us to what is prepared

As John stood at the Jordan River and warned people that the Messiah was coming as a judge, it’s easy to overlook the good news that he also shared. Yes, he John said that those who reject the Messiah will be burned up, but he also said that the Messiah will gather the wheat into his barn (Mt 3:12). He is referring to the believers who, by God’s grace, bring forth the fruit of faith. Believers, you, will be gathered into heaven. John knew about the happiness of heaven Jesus prepared for us. Isaiah described it in 11:6-8, “**The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra’s den, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest.**”

This is a description of what the Garden of Eden was like before Adam and Eve sinned and ruined our relationship with God. Animals lived at peace with each other. There was no food chain of kill or be killed. The paradise that was lost will be restored in heaven. Animals that are natural enemies now in a world infected with sin will play together like puppies. Animals that humans are scared of now, like poisonous snakes, will be like pets. Paradise will not be restored through international peace treaties, or counselors who get everybody to talk things through, or doctors who find a cure for cancer (although we would glad for all of those things). Paradise is restored only through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we look at our world, we see problems, pains, disease, death. As we look at our lives, we often see mistakes, regrets, frustrations and failures. But Jesus came to change all of that.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, hardly anyone noticed. It was like a small twig sprouting from a dead stump. Big deal. But now? Jesus is worshiped by millions upon millions throughout the world just as Isaiah said would happen (:10), “**In that day [when Jesus comes] the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.**” We are glad that John is blunt. John leads us to repent, to turn away from our sins and to turn toward Jesus, so we are prepared when he comes. John leads us to rejoice as we know what is prepared for us in heaven. We can hardly wait. And so with believers of all time we pray, “Even so Lord Jesus, quickly come and take us home.” Amen.