

One Sunday morning, a neatly dressed man disrupted a worship service in a suburban church. Right in the middle of the service, the man stood up in the balcony and shouted... "**I have a word from the Lord!**" Immediately the ushers sprang up into the balcony and escorted the man out the front doors of the church and into the street.

Thomas Long of Princeton Seminary, commenting on this event, says, "There's a kind of irony here. Week after week, those of us who preach stand in the pulpit and announce implicitly or explicitly, 'I have a word from the Lord. No one complains (not usually anyway). No alarmed ushers bound into the pulpit to drag us away. But let a stranger stand up in the balcony with a word and all good behavior breaks loose. *An unexpected voice from an unexpected angle.*"

"Now, in all probability, the fellow in the balcony was a crank, maybe running a quart or two low on reality. But let's not miss the point of the story. *Maybe, just maybe, the man was Isaiah, with a true and disturbing word from the Lord, or perhaps he was Ezekiel; half crank, half prophet, visionary and eccentric.* We'll never know. The point here is that God's word often comes from the balcony! It surprises us . . . disturbs us . . . embarrasses us . . . coming from places we least expect it. How like our God."

**John the Baptist was one of those balcony kind of people.** Dressed in wild animal skins, eating locusts and wild honey, John the Baptist would stand out in any congregation. Yet this was the man God chose to announce the coming of the Messiah. "*The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'*"

During this season of Advent, **you and I are preparing our hearts to celebrate Christ's coming.** We are buying our gifts, putting out our brightly colored lights, baking special treats for family and friends.

The preparation and anticipation are part of the joy of Christmas. But are such preparations adequate? In light of John's message, we need to do some other things if we are truly going to be ready for his coming.

**PREPARATION FOR THE COMING OF CHRIST MEANS, FIRST OF ALL, REPENTANCE.** Luke tells us that John came preaching a gospel of repentance. Give it some thought. How else would one prepare for the coming of the Son of God? The Bible tells us that God is holy, holy, holy! As R. C. Sproul reminds us, when the biblical writers want to add emphasis, they use repetition. God is holy, holy, holy! He is a God of righteousness and justice. How else could unholy people such as you and I receive the Lord's own anointed unless we repent?

C. S. Lewis once put it like this: "*Christianity has no message for those who do not realize they are sinners.*" **The truth is that we are sinners and God is righteous. If we are going to be prepared for his coming, we better recognize and do something about our sin.**

That is a side to Christmas that the world will not even acknowledge. They will extract those appealing parts of Christmas, the sweetness, the good cheer, the giving of gifts, but they have no concept of the deeper meaning of the Christmas event, that the holy God has invaded our world. **Part of the reason for his coming was to create a NEW COMMUNITY committed to a world unbroken by sin. That's a word our world needs to hear.**

You may have read sometime back about two Lake Worth, Florida, high school boys who drew suspensions for eating so much garlic that no one could stand to have them around. The boys said that their garlic binge began when they read that garlic has properties for cleansing blood and lowering blood pressure. At that point, each of them ate half a garlic head. For breakfast the next morning both students consumed three or four more heads of garlic a piece.

When teachers and students complained about their odor, the boys simply laughed and went on eating garlic. When confronted by school officials, one of the boys protested that the smell couldn't be all that bad. After all, he pointed out, "*We were blowing in each other's face, and we couldn't sense a garlic smell.*"

**That is precisely the same approach the world takes toward sin!** Knowing what is wrong, they laugh and flaunt their participation in the wrong. They desensitize their own consciences by wallowing in the sin until the sin no longer

smells bad to them. Then they act indignant that somebody should be so intolerant as to be bothered by what no longer bothers them.

John's word is a word of "REPENTENCE. If there is something trashy in our lives, something that is degrading, something beneath our dignity as children of God, **let's get rid of it!**

Motivational speaker Zig Ziglar says that when he was a boy, his mother told him to hoe two rows of beans. He was about eight years old. She showed him exactly how she wanted him to do it and she told him, "Now, when you get through, call me so I can come and look it over." When he finally got through as per her instructions, he called her to look it over. When she got there, she started shaking her head and she said, "*Well, son, it looks like you're going to have to do this over. For most boys this would be perfectly all right. But you're not most boys, you're my son. And my son can do better than this.*"

**That was John's message to our world.** God's children can do better than this. **Thus, the first step in preparation for the coming of the King of Kings is REPENTANCE.**

**SECOND, PREPARATION FOR CHRIST'S COMING MEANS A COMMITMENT TO RIGHTEOUS LIVING.** You might say that is redundant, that repentance involves a commitment to righteous living. But that is not what most people think of when they think of repentance. They think in terms of being sorry for a mistake and of making a promise not to make the same mistake again. They do not understand repentance as a complete change of direction. It is not enough for us to attack our weaknesses as an isolated part of our personality.

Mark David Chapman says that he feels great remorse for killing John Lennon. Chapman goes on to say, however, that the slaying doesn't make him an evil person. "You can't judge a man's life by one act. *Before I became the man who murdered John Lennon, "I was basically a decent person."*

In a newspaper interview from his isolation cell at Attica State Prison, where he is serving 20 years to life, Chapman said he suffered mental dissolution for years before killing the former Beatle on December 8, 1980, outside Lennon's apartment building in New York City. "I'm not an evil person," said Chapman. "*Like everybody, there is a small part within me that's evil, and that's what took over in my case.*"

In a sense Chapman is right. *There is a little bad in the best of us. There is also a little good in the worst of us. None of us is angel or demon.*

**A young man filled out an application for admission to a university.** In response to a request to list his personal strengths, he wrote, "Sometimes I am trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent." Where the form said to list his weaknesses, he wrote: "Sometimes I am not trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent."

None of us is perfect. Nevertheless, as Chapman's example clearly indicates, if we are satisfied with just a little of the worst in us, we run a tragic risk, for that little bit of worst has within it the ability to destroy our lives and to devastate those we love.

C. S. Lewis writes: "*Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of. An apparently trivial indulgence in lust or in anger today is the loss of a ridge or railway line or bridgehead from which the enemy may launch an attack otherwise impossible.*"

You may remember the woman who lived next door to a private zoo. She informed the police that she had a skunk in her cellar. "Open the cellar door," the officer advised, "make a trail of bread crumbs from the cellar to the garden, and wait for the skunk to follow it outside."

Half an hour later the woman called a second time. "I did what you said, now I have two skunks in my cellar. "It is not enough to try to reform one or two bad habits. What we need is a change of heart. What we need is a new

orientation. What we need is a total commitment to righteous living. **How do we prepare for the Lord's coming? By repenting of our wrongdoing and seeking after righteousness.**

**FINALLY, WE PREPARE FOR CHRIST'S COMING BY RECEIVING GOD'S GRACE.** We are not disciples of John the Baptist, as much as we admire him and as much as we seek to heed his words. **We are disciples of Jesus. We do repent of our sins. We do seek to live righteous lives.** But

**However, more importantly, we know that we do not have the power within ourselves to live as we ought to live.** Thus, we throw ourselves on his mercy. We depend upon his grace to supply us, unworthy as we are, **a righteousness that only he can give.**

Country comedian Jerry Clower once told about a lady he knew down in Amite County, Mississippi. She lived near a construction site, and workers were putting a tar roof on the building near her house. This lady had sixteen children, And one day she lost one of her children.

She got to hunting him and discovered he had fallen into a fifty-gallon drum of black roofing tar at the construction site. She reached down, hauled him up, took one look at him and shoved him back down in that drum of tar. She said,

God must feel that way about some of us sometimes. **It would be easier to have another one than to try to clean us up. BUT HE DOES CLEAN US UP... He gives us what we need to make a new start.** That is the good news of Advent and Christmas. **Because of the Christ child, each of us can make a new beginning.**

Jerome, a Roman Catholic scholar, translated the Bible from Greek to Latin. Near the end of his life, Jerome was living near Bethlehem translating some of the Bible when he had a dream. In the dream, the Christ child appeared to him. He was so overwhelmed by the appearance of the Christ child that he felt he had to give him something. So, he got some money and offered it, saying, "Here! This is yours."

The Christ child said, "I don't want it." Jerome brought some more possessions. The Christ child said, "I don't want them either."

Jerome said, "If there is anything in the world that I can give you, tell me what it is. Tell me! What do you want? **What do you want me to give you?"**

He said he dreamed that the Christ child looked at him and said this: ***"Give me your sin! That's what I came for."*** **That is what Christ came for--to take away our sin.**

**How shall we prepare for his coming? Repentance, a commitment to righteous living, and a willingness to receive his grace and love. It is through this way of LIVING...our Sinful Nature will be No More!!!**

**Amen.**