

## The Road to Bethlehem

Luke 3:1-9

Today we find ourselves in our second service of Advent. I don't know about you, but for me, the Christmas feeling is beginning to set in. Christmas lights are beginning to appear on houses. Some of us have already set up our Christmas tree in our homes. We've had our NBC Christmas banquet. The stores are getting busier and busier with bargain-seeking shoppers. Christmas is in the air.

Well, as the calendar edges closer and closer to that greatly anticipated day of December 25<sup>th</sup>, I think that we should begin making ***our*** way towards Bethlehem. That IS where we are headed. That IS the place of distinction during these days. We need to start looking for the little town of Bethlehem.

The thought of Bethlehem conjures up so many thoughts for us. What do you think of when you think of Bethlehem?

During Christmas time, most of us think of a small, quaint village. We think of soft, warm music playing in the background. We think of a cozy, comfortable little corner in a clean, cheery, and quiet stable, where we can see a man, a woman, and a little infant who don't seem to have a care in the world. How in the world did we come up with these thoughts? My grandfather was a carpenter in Oregon, and on the side, he kept about 20 head of cattle for

milking. He kept his cattle in a barn that he had built himself. As children, my brothers and I played all over that barn. And I can tell you for sure that there were no comfortable little corners in that barn which were clean, cheery, and quiet!!

But regardless of what we *think* about, when we think of Bethlehem—whether our conceptions are realistic or falsely utopian—the fact of the matter is this: With Christmas coming closer and closer, it is time for us to start looking for Bethlehem.

The road to Bethlehem at Christmas time is a little different than you might expect. The path to Bethlehem has a few turns and detours which are sometimes forgotten by people in their hurry to make it to Christmas. But anyway you try to get at it, the road to Bethlehem is always the same road. For you see, you can ask anyone in the New Testament how you get to Bethlehem, and they will say the very same thing: “You go out to the desert, keep on going straight until you get to the River Jordan. You’ll see a man out there, standing waist deep in the water, baptizing people. That’s John the Baptist. If you want to go to Bethlehem, you really must start there.”

When you look into the New Testament, they all say the same thing. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, all four of the gospels say this very same thing. If you want to go to Bethlehem, if you want to see what’s happened, if you want

to understand what all the fuss of Christmas is really all about, then go see John.

To be honest with you, I really get kind of frustrated by the whole situation. You see, here I am; I go to the Bible to find out what Christmas means, and I run smack dab into John the Baptist. You just can't get away from it. If you want to find the directions to Bethlehem, if you want to know how we can get to Bethlehem from here, from where we are now, the answer is always the same. "Go out to the desert, keep going straight until you get to the River Jordan. There you will find a man standing waist deep in the water baptizing. That'll be John. Ask him. Ask John how you get to Bethlehem. That's what he's out there for! That's what he's out there for!"

Well, I don't know about you, but I don't *want* to ask John. I don't want to ask *him* how to get to Bethlehem. You see, John always seems to be just a little bit too pushy. He always seems to be just a little too much in my way. I mean, I look at the good news of the Gospel, and John stands in my way. I look for a comforting passage about Christmas for the second service of Advent, and John sticks his big hairy head right in my face. **Two** of the Gospels don't even mention the incredible events surrounding the birth of Christ at all.....but they mention JOHN!! Even the Jewish historian Josephus, who hardly says anything about Jesus at all, talks about John. To be

really honest with you today, I really don't want to ask John how to get to Bethlehem, because I know already what he is going to say to me.

You see, John is a prophet. And I'm not sure how we got this idea, but somewhere along the line we got the conception that prophets are only concerned about the future. We use the word "prophet" this way in English. Whenever we think of a prophet, we think of somebody who predicts what is going to happen in the future. Of course, this conception isn't *completely* wrong. Prophets DO predict the future from time to time. That is actually the part of the prophet that we think is all right. That is the part that we actually enjoy! Personally, I don't mind it at all when a prophet talks about the future. Usually it is rather interesting to hear what they have to say. And it certainly gives us something to talk and argue about.

But what is hard to take about prophets is what they say about the *present*. Prophets have things to say about THIS day, just as much as they have to say about days to come. And then they end up saying things like, "Why don't you practice what you preach?" Or "Why do you act and talk one way around your Christian friends, but you act and talk completely differently around your non-Christian friends?" Prophets always seem to remind you of things that you already know and don't want to be reminded of. They never say the right thing. For, you see, the "right thing" is what the "right people" want to hear. Prophets are always going to the right people, and saying the

wrong things. They are always saying things that the right people don't want to hear. They always do that! Every one of them! They all did that. And they all paid the consequences for doing it, too.

John the Baptist is no exception. I mean, look at what he says in verses 7 and 8 of our passage. Can you imagine my shock? Here I am, minding my own business as I read the sweet story of Jesus' birth in the gospel of Luke, and suddenly John jumps up and yells in my face, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath! Don't just *talk* about repentance! Produce fruit in keeping with repentance!" Well, merry Christmas to you, too, John!

I'm sure that you have heard what John did later. (These prophets! Will they never learn?). John went to Herod—not the one who is ruling at the beginning of the story; that one was Herod the Great. But John goes to Herod Antipas, who was Herod the Great's son. Well, Herod Antipas was guilty of murder, guilty of incest, and only the Lord Himself knows what else. At the time that John went to talk to Herod, he was married to his niece, who also just happened to be his sister-in-law!! With a brother like that, who needs enemies, right?

In the first century, most of the Jews had this strange idea that morality was serious business. That would be a unique idea for our society, wouldn't it be? What's more, most of the Jews believed that morality was a *corporate*

concern. In other words, they believed that immoral behavior had a negative effect upon all of society. They knew nothing about this “what I do is my own business as long as it doesn’t hurt anybody else” kind of morality. They believed that everything that you and I do either hurts or helps somebody else. They believed that society is NOT made up of autonomous individuals doing their own thing. Rather, most of the Jews believed that society is corporate like we are corporate; that is, society is like a BODY, a human body.

So if you have an infection somewhere within your society, the whole body of the society would get sick. And if you are the king, that’s sort of like being the head or the heart of the body politic. The king might not be any better or worse than anybody else in the society, but his sin or his virtue has a greater effect on the society than anybody else’s.

That’s true not only of kings, but of ALL leaders. So the prophets are always going to the leaders. It was sort of a shortcut way of reforming the whole society.

Well, on paper, this strategy might look like a pretty effective means of action. But think about this for a moment. Why don’t YOU go to the head of the state, why don’t YOU go to the Saddam Hussein of a nation and tell him what he knows, but doesn’t want to hear!! Nobody in their right mind who is dependent upon the king for salary, status and even life itself, wants to tell him

what he doesn't want to hear. ....And so the prophets got that job. They didn't volunteer either. God sent them out there.

And so here we have good ole hairy and grasshopper eating John. John went to Herod, and he told him, "Herod, you make me sick. As a matter of fact, you are making our entire nation sick—spiritually sick! YOU are an embarrassment to this nation. YOU are a perverted and twisted man. And YOU are an affront to God."

Herod only had one thing to say to John, "YOU are under arrest!" He locked him up in the castle at Machareus, until one night Herod's stepdaughter, who was also his grandniece, said she wanted John's head on a platter—and she got it.

Do you know what happened when Jesus heard about John? Do you know what he said? Jesus said, "There is no man born of woman greater than John." There's no higher praise than that....unless it's what John said about Jesus. John said, "He who is coming after me is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie."

There's a strong affinity between John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. That's why all the Gospel writers say that John knows who Jesus is.

So, if you want to know how to get to Bethlehem from where you are now, go see John. He knows who Jesus is. Go see John.

But I don't want to, because John is a prophet, and I know what John is going to say.

This is our second service in the season of Advent, the season of preparation for Christmas. Wow! We are now only a two weeks' journey away from Bethlehem. We're almost there, so, we might as well get it over with. We might as well go on out there and see John. To find John, we have to go out to the desert, and then keep on going straight until we get to the River Jordan. There we can see him standing, waist deep in the water, baptizing people. And he says to us exactly what I was afraid that he was going to say. He says what he has been saying for 2000 years. John looks us straight in the eye, and he says, "Hey, you. Repent!" Repent! Practice what you preach. Live up to the standards and ideals that you believe in. Turn around, and get back on track! That's what repentance means.

John doesn't tell us to go through some sort of period of remorse for being so bad. No, John tells us to turn around and to go in the other direction. Repent means that we need to start doing something good instead of something bad. Repent means that we need to start practicing what we preach. Repent means that we allow God to completely transform our lives. And that's what John says every Advent. Every year. And this year, in this second service of the season of Advent, we come up to it again. Repent!

You know, I've preached quite a few sermons about John the Baptist. I've studied John the Baptist in Sunday School classes and I have even spoken about John the Baptist in classes that I have taught here on campus. And in looking over this sermon, I decided that I'm going to ask John a question. This is a question that has been bothering me for quite some time now. "Hey John, why do you keep talking about repentance at Christmas time? Can't you get into the Christmas spirit? No wonder we never see your face on any of the Christmas cards. You're in danger of becoming the Grinch that stole Christmas. This is supposed to be a *happy* time, this is not the time to be talking about repentance!"

Well, old John's head snaps to attention and he looks me straight in the eye. I'm afraid that he almost drowned the poor guy he was baptizing. Then John slowly climbs out of the water. He has been in there so long that his legs are blue. He says, "You fixin' to go to Bethlehem?"

"Yes, that's where we're headed. In about two weeks we'll be there."

"Well, maybe you don't understand what happened there," he says. "I'll admit, it wasn't as I expected either. I expected the Messiah to come in glory with a sword, to separate the righteous from the sinners; but that didn't happen. Instead, he came in humility as a baby. He didn't come with a bang; he came with a whimper. He didn't come in force to defeat the kingdom of Herod; but he came in love to win the hearts of believers. So what you are

faced with is what people have been faced with ever since I came out here and started baptizing. You are faced with a choice. Which king are you going to give your loyalty to, Herod or Jesus? 'To the kingdom of this world or to the Kingdom of God?'"

Then John asks me, "By the way, why are you going to Bethlehem? Are you going to Bethlehem to meet a baby Jesus and get him to bless you and your world just the way it is? Or are you going to Bethlehem to meet a Savior and let him change you so that you can change the world?"

You see? That's the very reason why I didn't want to see John! I knew what he was going to say, and I didn't want to hear it. I wanted to hear that because God came into this world the way it is, then the "way it is" is all right with God. And John won't let me believe that!

So often we think, "If I'm going to survive, if I'm going to make it in the world, then I've got to be realistic. And Herod might be wrong, but Herod rules this world. Not Jesus."

THAT'S the way we usually think. But John the Baptist won't let us get away with that. He won't do it. He says, "The Kingdom of God is HERE, friend! Jesus brought it. It's not as I expected it to be, but it's here! 'The one who follows me is greater than I am, whose things I am not worthy to untie.' He's the Messiah, all right. So the Kingdom is here."

With that, John turns his back to me, and he shuffles back to the river. “It’s here, all right”, he says as he turns his head and looks back over his shoulder. “And deep down inside, you KNOW it’s here. The problem is, if it’s here, the only way you’re going to know for sure is to *choose* it. And when you’re ready...when you are ready to really prepare yourself for Christmas....I’ll be here in the water waiting for you!” And with that, he braces his bony feet against the river bottom and cries again, “Repent! For the Kingdom of God is here!”

John is there to remind us that Advent is a time of repentance. John is there to remind us that the only proper preparation for Christmas is to DO what Jesus taught. And it all begins with repentance. If we are alienated from somebody, this is the time to repent, and to seek reconciliation. If we have been self-righteous, now is the time for us to repent, and to recognize that righteousness only comes through Christ Jesus by faith. If we have been selfish and self-seeking, now is the time for us to repent, and to truly follow Jesus, who came not to be served, but to serve. If we have been dishonest, always trying to twist the truth to our own selfish advantage, now is the time for us to repent, and to allow our lives to be conformed to Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. If we have assumed that we are going to be judged by our own inherent goodness and avoidance of evil, now is the time for us to repent, and

to recognize that we are going to be judged by our repentance and our faith in Christ alone.

You see, John is there to remind us of this. He is there to remind us that there are moral consequences to Christmas. It wasn't a fairy tale. It wasn't make-believe. The Messiah was born at Christmas. The seed of God's ultimate plan for salvation has been planted. And the kingdom of God is now here. There are now TWO kingdoms here. Which one has your loyalty?

The road to Bethlehem always bends its way to John. Regardless of how you try to walk it, you can't avoid the cold and wet man in the middle of the river. The directions to Bethlehem are always the same. They take us into the desert to hear a man who has truly discovered how we need to prepare ourselves for Christmas. "Repent! For the Kingdom of God is here." The announcement of Christmas is a proclamation of repentance.

What kinds of preparations have YOU made for Christmas? What have YOU done to get ready for the celebration of the coming of Jesus? Are you ready to go the right way to Bethlehem? Well, this Christmas, John the Baptist will be waiting for you. Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him! Repent of your sins, and celebrate the *real* Christmas!

Amen!