
Preparing the Way

BOB HEERSPINK

This Sunday begins Advent; the Christian season of waiting and anticipation. To prepare our hearts for Christmas, let's examine the Christmas story as we find it in the book of Matthew. This week we look at John the Baptist and his role in preparing the world for Christ's birth. So, with John the Baptist as our guide, let's dig into scripture and be honest with ourselves about who we are and our deepest spiritual needs. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. Well, Dave, we are counting the days until Christmas, and we are supposed to be getting into that holiday season. How are you doing? How is your Christmas shopping coming?

DAVE BAST

Yes, I don't do too much of that, fortunately. I passed that off to my wife, Bob, but...

BOB HEERSPINK

Good move.

DAVE BAST

I am listening to Christmas carols; I will admit that. I cannot kind of wait. I love Christmas music and... I at least try to wait until Thanksgiving is over and done with before I start the Christmas music in the car and at home; but you know, we are all caught up in this kind of rush and sort of jumping the gun on celebrating Christmas.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; this is the busy, busy season, and so many complain to me about the fact that it is too much. They want to slow down; they just don't know how.

DAVE BAST

That is the funny thing, isn't it? Everybody seems to complain about the busyness, and the parties, and the crowds, and too much shopping; but nobody knows what to do about it. How do you stop? How do you get off the merry-go-round?

BOB HEERSPINK

How do you get yourself under control? You know, one of the things that really strikes me is that while we talk about the *holiday* season, the Christian Church through the years has talked about the *Advent* season. Now, that really was a concept when I was younger, as I was growing up, that wasn't much in the church that I attended. We kind of got ready for Christmas by telling the Christmas story, but the idea of Advent... that was pretty foreign to my church tradition.

DAVE BAST

Mine too, to some degree. We didn't make a big deal out of Advent either. That seemed to be sort of a Catholic thing, you know, or at least Lutherans or Episcopalians. They were the ones who tended to do that; but I think it is a wonderful way for us to reclaim the whole month of December. You mentioned the holiday season, Bob, and we know that is another thing that is going on in our culture, too, isn't it? Kind of a de-emphasis on the Christian aspect of the feast of Christmas. We are multicultural and all that, and there are other holidays that have been kind of dragged into December. That is all well and good, but maybe for us the key is to gain a sense of Advent. What is Advent all about?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I really appreciate with you the Advent season. It is something that, over the last 25 years, I have been participating in in my church and in my personal life. You know, advent means preparation – it means waiting; and that sense of anticipation, getting ready for this incredibly great event that we call Christmas, I think, is at the core of what we as Christians need to do during this season of the year.

DAVE BAST

And the way you prepare, traditionally – historically – in the Christian faith is by contemplation, meditation on the scriptures, prayer, and even self denial. Here is an interesting thing, Bob; the color – the traditional color for the season of Advent is purple; just like for the season of Lent; and in the ancient Church, these two things were combined and observed in the same way by a time of fasting and self denial. Wow, talk about radical; talk about countercultural! How about fasting during December until you get to Christmas?!

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, that is the thing; you know, Advent is really much more like Lent than people typically think; and what people want to do during the Christmas season is simply, hey, get to the tree and rip open those gifts; but the message of Advent is that we are not ready to celebrate Christmas until we have done some serious introspection.

DAVE BAST

There is also an emphasis on the second advent of Christ, looking forward to that; and some of the texts that historically the Church has considered, have to do with the waiting time that we are in now for the Lord to return; and that also calls for a sense of kind of self denial and a longing that ancient Israel had as they looked forward to the coming of the Messiah: O, Come, O, Come, Immanuel; you know, that great Advent hymn. The longing that we have to see Christ come back and finish the work of salvation. There is so much suffering.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; there is a balance, then, to our Advent season, isn't there? I mean, there is a looking back; Jesus has come; but there is also a looking forward; Jesus is coming; and so this is a really powerful time of year because it really affirms God's saving work in the world, the approach of his kingdom, the coming of his kingdom, but it says there is more.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I like that.

BOB HEERSPINK

A lot more.

DAVE BAST

I like that. Here is another really interesting thing, I think, and that is the figure that comes striding off the pages of the Gospels to begin this season; and it is not maybe someone you would guess. It is not the wise men; it is not the shepherds that we start with. Our two oldest kids both went to college at a Lutheran college

in Minnesota with a great music program, St. Olaf College, and the first weekend of December, which was usually the first Sunday of Advent, we would go out there for a big music festival, and we would go to worship on Sunday at the chapel; and every year it was always the same theme because they followed the Lectionary. It was about John the Baptist. I heard like five John the Baptist sermons over the years; and that is the person, historically and traditionally, that Advent begins with.

BOB HEERSPINK

John is so important, and we tend to forget that. If you go to the Gospels, two of the Gospels have a birth story; others just basically start with his ministry...

DAVE BAST

Matthew and Luke, yes; Matthew and Luke start with the Christmas story.

BOB HEERSPINK

But everybody mentions John the Baptist. You know, he is key, but he is so strange; and yet, unless you capture his message in your own life, you really miss the meaning of this season of the year.

DAVE BAST

The appearance of John... and you see it, I guess, most abruptly in the Gospel of Mark, which simply begins: This is the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God... and then all of a sudden, boom, there is John the Baptist walking in preaching with his strange appearance; but it is also mentioned later on in Acts. Again and again we are pointed to this figure of John the Baptist. Maybe...

BOB HEERSPINK

Let me read some of the story and see what John is really like according to Matthew. Matthew 3:1: In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea ²and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." ³This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: A voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight paths for him." ⁴John's clothes were made of camel's hair and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, ⁶they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁷But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned *you* to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹Do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰The axe is already at the root of the trees and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹I baptize you with water for repentance, but after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his threshing floor; gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

DAVE BAST

Okay, so that is a great presentation of John's message – John's preaching – and his baptism – his characteristic act. Let's dig into it in just a moment after we take a break.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to our *Groundwork* conversation. Dave, right before the break, we read this passage about John the Baptist; and you know, as I read that I am picturing in my mind these cartoons of the prophet wandering up and down through Times Square...

DAVE BAST

Yes, I know.

BOB HEERSPINK

Carrying the signboard saying: Repent. The end is near!

DAVE BAST

The end is near; yes, I got it... I got the same picture.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, I wonder if in John's day he would have been seen as that strange. I think he would have been.

DAVE BAST

Well, there is an attention paid to his costume, even, here. I mean, how often do we read in the Gospels how somebody was dressed? Not very often, I don't think, but in John's case attention is drawn to it. A garment of hair and a leather belt or girdle around his waist; and then his cuisine...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, his insect...

DAVE BAST

Yes; locusts and wild honey. This is not a fashion statement, I don't think. I think this is a clue.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, it is a statement about who he is...

DAVE BAST

Exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

Because he is really dressed in the Old Testament garb of a prophet.

DAVE BAST

And specifically, we could say, of Elijah.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

That idea of going into the wilderness... Think of all the stories in the Old Testament about Elijah. The first and, in some ways, the greatest of the prophets; the only one who was taken up to heaven.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, Elijah comes into the Old Testament scene, and he is really the forerunner of Elisha; and there is that role that now John the Baptist is going to play with Jesus. He is the forerunner.

DAVE BAST

Which is another very interesting theme. If you really dig into the Bible, and the Gospel story, we know that there was a tradition – an expectation – that Elijah would return to earth before the Messiah came. So some people asked: Is John Elijah? And Jesus himself in one place says that, in a sense, yes; John is Elijah come back to earth. Not that he is a reincarnation or anything like that.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is true; and if you think about all these hundreds of years when prophecy ended, we are not hearing prophecy from Malachi until John the Baptist, and suddenly there is a new prophet in town.

DAVE BAST

So that is a significant thing in and of itself. Four hundred years of silence, at least as far as an authoritative, anointed messenger from God; and then suddenly John appears.

BOB HEERSPINK

And what he comes and what he does... He is calling all these people – all these Jewish folk – to baptism, and that again... You know, we have baptism in our churches, so we say: Oh, yes. What is the deal? But this is huge in his own setting because Gentiles might be baptized as a sign that they are being included into the people of God, but now here are the people of God: Hey, we are part of this Jewish nation and we need to be baptized?

DAVE BAST

Well, and baptism was so significant for John that that is what gave him his name. We call him John the Baptist; in the New Testament it is literally John the Baptizer. It was a sort of nickname, but so important was it for what he was doing, and so central was it to his message and ministry that the name kind of stuck to him.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, he is not in one of the local synagogues, he is down at the Jordan, and his invitation is: You all come and you all be baptized because something so big is going to happen that you have to get ready for it. That something big is the dawning of God's reign – God's kingdom – in the Messiah.

DAVE BAST

I think it is interesting to me to try to imagine what an impact he must have made. People just couldn't figure him out. I am talking about John again now; and so, there is another story in one of the Gospels where a delegation comes from the priests in Jerusalem and the Pharisees – the leaders – and they want to interrogate John, so they ask him: Who are you? Are you the Messiah? John says: No; no, I am not the Messiah. Are you the great prophet? No, John says; well, he was in a sense, but he is sort of self-effacing. Well, then, who are you? And John replies...

BOB HEERSPINK

I am a voice.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I love that. Isn't that great?

BOB HEERSPINK

Just a voice.

DAVE BAST

And then quotes Isaiah: A voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord," or if we punctuate it differently: A voice crying, "In the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord."

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; now the way you prepare... and I think that gets us back to the whole notion of Advent, is you repent.

DAVE BAST

That is his message, isn't it?

BOB HEERSPINK

Turn around; turn around from moving away from God toward God; and to me, this is really countercultural. I mean, this is not the way the holiday seasons typically go, where we are thinking about, okay, what do I need to change in my life? What do I need to do to turn around to face the coming of Jesus? And what I find so powerful, Dave, is that this is not just said to people who are out there wandering away from God, unconcerned about spiritual issues; this is said to the Church.

DAVE BAST

Religious people.

BOB HEERSPINK

We need to do this. This is for us.

DAVE BAST

Bob, I think that is so important. I want to go back and talk about the definition of what repentance really is in the Bible because I think a lot of people might just think it is confession – it is saying you are sorry – and there is a lot of confession going on in our culture even outside of churches. Look at reality TV; the things people are willing to confess on the Internet; and it is not just feeling sorry for your sins either, or your shortcomings and faults. It is more than that. It is taking action; it is taking a radical step decisively.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, for John, if you really repented you showed the fruits of repentance, so it really is turning your life; not just saying I am sorry I mess up, but really saying what do I need to do to turn my life so that I am in alignment with God's reign – God's rule in Jesus Christ?

DAVE BAST

I just jotted a word down as I was thinking about this: Reorienting your life. That idea of physically turning away from sin almost and back to God, or away from the world and toward the Messiah, the Lord; but is a kind of reorientation; a spiritual reorganization of what your life is revolving around.

BOB HEERSPINK

And all of us need to do that on a regular basis; to take this look; and I think that is the beauty of Advent. Once a year slow down, not be overwhelmed by all the busyness, but to really say how do I have to get back in sync with God and with his coming in Christ and with his returning glory?

DAVE BAST

But John, this towering figure who points us to the Messiah, who calls us to repentance... he didn't exactly have it all together either. He wasn't the...

BOB HEERSPINK

We think he did, but he didn't.

DAVE BAST

He wasn't a spiritual superman. We sometimes stumble and fall and John did, too. I think we ought to consider that as well before we leave his story.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; the Bible is honest about who John was, and there is another chapter to John. We need to talk about that when we come back.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Hi; welcome back. This is *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast, along with my partner, Bob Heerspink, and today we are digging into the scriptures about John the Baptist, and the season of Advent. We have talked about, Bob, the classic passage where John comes and baptizes and calls people to repentance, but there is a story later in Matthew – in Chapter 11 – when John is in prison and he begins to have his own doubts about Jesus. Let me just read a couple of verses from that:

²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, ³“Are you the one who was to come or should we expect someone else?” ⁴And Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see. ⁵The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor.”

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, Dave, we talk about doubting Thomas... we don't talk about doubting John, but...

DAVE BAST

We could.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, this pillar of strength who is out there and facing up to the religious authorities. He is fearless. Suddenly he is in prison and he is shaken, and I don't think it is merely because he ended up behind bars for his faith. I don't think that is really what is going on here.

DAVE BAST

It just struck me, we have been talking about how John is the second Elijah; Elijah had his period in season of doubt, too, didn't he?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, he did.

DAVE BAST

And here is John with the same thing.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is interesting because I think those two periods of doubt are related to each other. You know, Elijah expected so much more after he slew the prophets of Ba'al. You know, he thought, hey, God's kingdom was going to come.

DAVE BAST

Mountaintop experience. He wins a great victory for God.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and I think the same is true for John. John said: Here comes Jesus and it is all going to happen right now. We are going to cast out these Romans, the religious establishment is going to crumble, and God's kingdom is going to be here; and John is looking around and he is in jail and Jesus is going around healing people, but the authorities are still in place; and he is saying: What is going on?

DAVE BAST

I wonder if we could even relate it to our own experience as Christians? We repent, we have an encounter with God, we have this terrific spiritual experience, we seek the Lord and we find him; but then we wake up the next morning and life is pretty much the same. It is not easy. Maybe that is kind of part of our pattern, too, as Christians.

BOB HEERSPINK

I think so. We look at what is happening in the world; we look at the Church; and we become so discouraged because it seems like God's kingdom is moving into this world so slowly; and we say where is God and where are all of these fantastic promises? You know, the axe is laid to the root of the tree. Why isn't evil toppling all around us?

DAVE BAST

Yes; meanwhile Herod – that wicked king – has the upper hand and arrests John and puts him in jail. What is going on there? Why didn't God protect his servant?

BOB HEERSPINK

So, I think we, like John, end up saying: Are you really the Christ? You know, here we are in Advent season. We are looking forward to Jesus' coming. Is he really the one? I think if we are honest about ourselves, we say we wrestle with those same doubts, too.

DAVE BAST

Here comes the longing back into this time of year and season in our lives: O, Come, O, Come, Emmanuel. Lord, you are the One. We don't see it all happening yet. We want your kingdom to come here on earth as it is in heaven; but meanwhile we watch and we wait; and we do see here and there, as Jesus pointed out, signs of that kingdom and its coming.

BOB HEERSPINK

And Dave, that is just what Jesus said to John. He said: Open your eyes and you will see that these miracles are happening that show that the rule of God is breaking into the world; but I think where John misunderstood – he didn't have a full revelation at this point in time – is that Christ's work was going to take place in two stages. He has come to give his life. He has come to break down the walls of sin; but what I think John failed to realize, because of course, he didn't have a full revelation at this point in time, was that Jesus' work was two staged. He has come into the world to defeat evil, but he is going to return to fully fulfill those promises that John the Baptist was offering during his ministry.

DAVE BAST

Our life here is lived by faith in the promises of God, and the greatest promise of Jesus is that he will come again, and he will fulfill all things and create the new heavens and the new earth. I don't know if you have ever had that experience of saying: Oh, I wish I could have lived back then and seen Jesus; but so many who saw him didn't believe in him; and even John doubted at times. It is really faith that comes by hearing and believing God's word that makes us live and look forward in hope to the final advent of Jesus Christ.

BOB HEERSPINK

And that is really what Jesus is saying to John the Baptist. He is saying: John, open your eyes. The miracles that are happening are signs that the reign of God is here in my ministry; but what John didn't understand was that the promises were going to be fulfilled two stage: First coming; second coming; and that as Jesus comes, manifesting grace and establishing God's kingdom, the judgment passages where all evil is wiped away will only be fulfilled when Jesus comes the second time.

DAVE BAST

And perhaps the reason we could say for that delay is to give the world an opportunity to repent, coming right back to John's message.

BOB HEERSPINK

To focus in on the theme of Advent.

DAVE BAST

Turn again away from sin. Reorient your life toward God. There is a wonderful story I read years ago from a Puritan named Philip Henry who said: Repentance is so important that if I were to die in the pulpit, I would want to die preaching it, and if I died out of the pulpit, I would want to die practicing it.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Let's practice repentance.

BOB HEERSPINK

So we sing, in this season of the year, "Joy to the world, the Lord has come;" but we could also sing that song as "Joy to the world, the Lord *will* come;" and I would really hope that in this Advent season, we not forget that important aspect of what we are celebrating.

DAVE BAST

Well, thank you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation today; and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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