



Sermon from 12/16/2007

It's Time To Get Ready ©

[Third in a Series of Four Advent Messages]

Texts: Psalm 146:5-10 and Matthew 11:2-11

Rev. Dr. Daniel Meister

Zion United Church of Christ

Norwood, Ohio

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*“Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man.”
Francis Bacon*

Everything in life is composed of preparation.

Preparation is valuable to life.

When I was a kid, I frequently remember my folks shouting up the staircase, *“It’s time to get ready!”*

And sometimes, to be honest, I didn’t want to get ready...because sometimes getting ready can be a hassle or an interruption...or an inconvenience.

Now, I find myself saying those very words that were once said to me, “It’s time to get ready” to my own daughter.

But teaching the art (or science) of preparation is key to our children’s future survival.

And what about adults?

I spend approximately 6-8 hours per week preparing my Sunday message.

This includes praying over the text for that Sunday...reflecting theologically and pastorally upon it...researching the text, writing down my thoughts and then typing up my manuscript and editing my notes.

Our Chancel Choir prepares to bless us on Sunday by attending practice; showing up early and staying late.

There are instruments to tune, and voices to warm up.

There are composers to be considered, parts to be selected, as well as having an awareness of how our worship ought to flow.

Think of yourselves: you had an alarm to set last night; weather to consider, perhaps children to ready; a car to warm up.

You had to make a trip here, get into the sanctuary and have a quiet moment of personal, spiritual preparation.

Preparation takes time (usually a lot of it), forethought, and concrete planning—esp.in the form of the question, “Who will do what?”

And why do we do it?

Why all these hours upon hours spent in getting ourselves into this place for an hour + worship service on Sunday morning?

I suppose our answers would be as different as each person here.

But the one overriding answer that we must all give is that ***we are here to prepare for what we must do out there!***

Some people look at worship as the end point of what they need to do for God—like many see Christmas as an end point: you know what Christmas comes and Christmas goes and then we can get on living without such an emphasis upon Jesus.

But Christmas is but prelude.

Christmas is a preparation for all that will follow: hearing His message, doing His work, carrying our cross, building His kingdom, talking about the Good News, growing in faith, practicing mercy, appreciating His grace, and accepting and sharing His love.

So remember: Christmas isn't climax—it is prelude!

Christmas isn't, "*Boy, I'm glad it's over with!*"

It's, "*I'm glad God's work has just begun!*"

Didn't Elvis once sing?:

*Oh why cant every day be like Christmas
Why cant that feeling go on endlessly
For if everyday could be just like Christmas
What a wonderful world this would be*

Admittedly, we struggle with the importance of preparation today.

We just don't see it as having much value and worth.

The chief objection is usually, "*Why do I need to get ready?...*" "*Can't I just show up?*"

Which is the attitude that a lot of people have about their own spirituality.

You know some people have the mentality or idea that "*I don't need to get ready for heaven...I'll just 'show up' and take it from there.*"

It might sound strange, but I am a firm proponent of 'salvation by preparation' (note: I am not saying 'salvation THROUGH preparation').

Why?

Because the upshot of Jesus' visit to us is this: one doesn't just mistakenly wander into heaven or the Kingdom of God.

It don't happen that way.

If heaven were the automatic default position, set for all people, regardless of whether they "believe" or not, then Jesus has come to us in vain and both His message and that of John the Baptist's were quite unnecessary.

But, if you've ever known someone who doesn't prepare (or who isn't good at doing it) when they do "show up," they usually don't know what's going on or what they should be doing.

This, then, creates havoc upon everybody that spent the time trying to get ready.

Many people, when they get to heaven, will be surprised to learn that their life on earth was not as disconnected from heaven as they had originally thought.

Indeed, the very birth of Jesus Christ—the incarnation—teaches us that heaven and earth not only touch, but they are inseparably joined together and intricately involved with one another at every level...right down to our base attitudes, everyday deeds, and reoccurring temptations.

There is, of course, the temptation to be unprepared by reason of 'no-fault'.

You know what this is.

It's a nifty little idea that the automobile insurance industry came up with several years ago to say no matter if you hit someone—or they hit you—it's nobody's fault.

And we adopt this same approach, at times, in our thinking about God and Christ Jesus.

Our God is a 'no-fault' God, we say...or think.

"Preparation is largely unnecessary—spiritual or unspiritual—God let's everyone in."

But we are not Unitarians!¹

For Unitarians make Jesus optional.

He's just one good choice among many on-the-grocery-store-shelf world religions.

And last time I checked, I was not a Unitarian Pastor...and this was not a Unitarian Universalist church.

You see, our personal struggle and the struggle of today's culture is the tension we feel between 'preparation', on the one hand, and 'instant gratification' on the other.

More and more, we are impatient and results-focused.

If results don't immediately follow—and I mean 'immediately'—we tend to lose heart and become discouraged.

Whether we like it or not...we now live in a period of history where time is compressed and "success" is determined by how much we can "squeeze in."

Preparation, rather than being something we reject or fight against, is actually key to developing a vital spirituality that loosens the chokehold that instant gratification has upon us.

That was Jesus' message to John, as John lay in prison.

Preparation slows us down and causes us to think about our direction, our resources, and our motivation—and all of this is good!

¹ For a summary of Unitarian Universalist ideas, go to: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unitarian_Universalism

When John sent his followers to ask Jesus: "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"²

Jesus replied, "I am the One."

But His answer is not defensively based on the statement: "I'm the guy."

Rather, His answer is based on all that the prophets foretold Messiah would do: *The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.*³

And this statement by Jesus, then, validates the importance of John's ministry of preparation.

In fact, Jesus goes on to say, *I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*

And if Jesus affirms all that John did as the Forerunner and Preparer...at Advent we need to share in that same "get ready" Spirit.

Why?

Because Jesus is coming again!

*For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'*⁴

Even though we proclaim Jesus is Christ the Lord (as the hymn Silent Night urges us to do), celebrating His first Advent in Bethlehem—we also are a "getting' ready" people as we prepare for His Second Advent when He will return to judge the living and the dead.⁵

And so John teaches us a little bit about what it means to get ready for Jesus (be that His first coming in Bethlehem) or His Second coming in the clouds with His army of angels.⁶

First, we must be a little bit radical.

Scripture says, John wore camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey—not your "average" guy!⁷

To get ready for Jesus, one must live a little radically and be a little wild.

But, don't misunderstand me: this is not a 'wicked' wild...this being wild for God.

It is about learning that in order to prepare for Jesus, sometimes unusual behaviours must be adopted, unusual pronouncements spoken, and unusual sacrifices made.

And Jesus says, *"Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."*⁸

And what did John preach?

² Matthew 11:2

³ Matthew 11:5

⁴ At the conclusion of Jesus' earthly ministry He again stakes His claim as Messiah by rooting the Good News in the prophecies of the Psalms. His statement here is a direct reference to Psalm 118:26.

⁵ Acts 10:42, 2 Timothy 4:1, 1 Peter 4:5.

⁶ *And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.* [Matthew 24:30].

⁷ Matthew 3:4

⁸ Matthew 11:6

John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same. Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do? Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do? He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."⁹

Being a "Getting' Ready" people also means that we speak out against injustice and immorality (as John did against Herod) and hypocrisy (as he did against the religious leaders of his day).

So, is there any injustice and immorality today?

Then speak!

Let's open our mouths and take a stand.

You see 'Political Correctness' (contrary to popular belief) wasn't invented in our time.

We've just popularized a cute phrase within our culture, but being 'politically correct' has been known in every time of history and culture.

Even in John's day, people would flatter Herod with all kinds of lies just to save their own skins.

But not John!

If John the Baptist had been "P.C." he would have kept his head.

Even as the axe man sharpened his blade for John's head, John faithfully enabled people to fully follow Jesus.



And this becomes our role today!

What are we doing here?

We are the Prepared Ones who now prepare others to follow Jesus as John once did.

Jesus said of John that he was no marsh-mellow...no cream puff!

And when the messengers of John were departed, he began to speak unto the people concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind?

But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously appavelled, and live delicately, are in kings' courts. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet. This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.¹⁰

⁹ Luke 3:10-14

¹⁰ Luke 7:24-28

John would not have suffered a Unitarian stance, at all!

John had one focus and one focus only: to get others ready for Messiah.

May we, whom Jesus calls 'greater than John'¹¹ have John's same strength of character, his same focus upon injustice and unrighteousness, and an unfailing tenacity to follow Jesus no matter where...or what!

Amen.¹²

Questions for Reflection:

1. What importance do you place on preparation in your life?
2. How much time do you devote to spiritual preparation on a daily basis?
3. How does preparation within the church relate to our work for Jesus outside of the church?
4. What tensions do you experience in your life between 'preparation' and 'instant gratification'?
5. What do you think of the idea of 'no-fault' within our culture? How has this influenced the Church? How does it influence our theology? What is the relationship between 'no-fault' and personal accountability?
6. How can you be a little bit more like John in either your character or lifestyle?
7. What are ways that our churches can become 'Getting Ready' churches?
8. How do you feel when you hear Jesus say that YOU are greater than John?
9. What prevents you from taking a stand for Jesus?
10. Is morality (how you live your life based upon what is right and wrong) wholly subject to one's personal opinions?

¹¹ Luke 7:28

¹² This sermon is published here for Internet users since on Sunday 12.16.07 worship was cancelled due to inclement weather conditions. For a further interesting discussion on the relationship between John and Jesus, visit: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/john.html>