

CHRISTMAS HAPPENS INSIDE

Dr. Fred Fourie ~Sunday, December 17, 2006



MARK 1: 1-8: The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

JOHN 1:1-12 In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.

How are you doing with Christmas 2006? Only one week left before Christmas! Did you get al your shopping done? One of our younger mothers took the kids shopping for Christmas. The crowds were awful. She had to skip lunch because she was on a tight schedule. Now she was tired, hungry, her feet were hurting, and she was more than just a little irritable. As they left the last store, she asked her daughter, "Did you see that nasty look that saleslady gave me?" The girl answered, "She didn't give it to you, Mom. You had it when you went in."

John's Gospel begins with an outstanding description of the birth of Jesus Christ. "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Then the author appears to loose his focus and suddenly changed the subject, talking about John the Baptist. He writes, "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him."

Almost every account of the coming of Jesus seems to begin with a reference to this wandering man shouting in the wilderness, calling the people **to let go of their sinful ways** and to make room for the child who was coming. For the Baptist there was not much of a joyful message, but rather an urgent call for people **to look up, to see and to follow the light** that was coming into the world!

A certain worker with good credentials got a job painting a yellow line down the highway. After three days, the supervisor complained, "The first day you did great – you painted that yellow line three miles. The second day was not bad – you did two miles. But today you only painted one mile, so I'm going to have to fire you." On his way out of the supervisor's office, the fired worker looked back and said: "It's not my fault. Each day I got further from the paint can!"

Someone put it this way, "If you do not feel as close to God as you used to, tell me, who moved?"

John the Baptist seems out of place in our celebration of Christmas. According to the popular carol, "It is the season to be jolly!" Yet we regularly cross paths with John the Baptist and his call to turn back to God as part of the glorious Christmas story! John's task is to help us get ready to meet the Child in the Manger. We cannot find our way to Bethlehem without the help of this man. **John points the way for us.**

John the Baptist told the people to prepare for the child that was to be born by straightening out their lives. There was a sense of urgency in John's message. There was not much time left. The Christ was coming soon. They needed to be ready. Preparation for John's message was simple and to the point: **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."** To repent means to change the direction of our lives. To repent means to experience a change of heart or attitude. Repent means to turn our lives around. It means to turn back to God. The degree of repentance that John spoke about requires a radical transformation. To repent means to change our behavior and attitude toward many things! It may be time to face reality. It may be time for many to overcome distance, separation, broken friendship and painful relationships. It may be time to exchange bitterness for reconciliation and to work on healing the wounds of the past. **The time-tested message of John the Baptist is to change our wrong and harmful ways,** because Jesus would soon be on the scene!

Well, we all know what the outcome of John's outcries was! He finally offended King Herod and paid for it with his life. Calling people to renewal and new life in Christ was not popular 2000 years ago, and not much has changed since then. John's call to awaken people from complacency will always be an Advent message to help us prepare for Christ in our lives.

It is easy to hear John's cry to change our ways, only to think that it somehow does not apply to us. We are inclined to believe that the message to turn around **is meant for real sinners** "out there, somewhere," and definitely not for respectable folk who come to church every week. However, **John's message is for us.** It is a call to examine ourselves, to awaken us from our sense of complacency.

To prepare our lives means to remove those things that clutter our lives and prevent us from being the people Jesus intends us to be. It means making some drastic changes in our lives, right here and now, because there is not much time left. Only when we clear back that clutter, make those drastic changes, and eliminate that smugness, we discover the true meaning of Christmas!

My favorite story about the spirit of Christmas concerns a family including three boys that were vacationing in France one Christmas. The father later explained, "For five wretched days everything had gone wrong and by the time Christmas Eve arrived, there was no Christmas spirit in our hearts. Besides, it was cold and raining as we went out to eat. We found a drab little restaurant shoddily decorated for the holiday. As we entered, we noticed that only five tables were occupied, two German couples, two French families, and an American sailor, all by himself. In the corner a piano player was listlessly played Christmas music!"

On that Christmas Eve, no one in the restaurant seemed too happy. **Customers were eating in stony silence.** The young sailor was writing a letter while he was eating. The waiter brought someone the wrong meal and at another table, children were acting up. It was one of those days that you wished you had never gotten out of bed!

Suddenly an unpleasant blast of cold air interrupted them all. Through the door came an old flower woman. She wore a dripping, tattered overcoat and shuffled in on wet, rundown shoes. She went from one table to another. "Flowers, monsieur? Only one franc." No one bought any. Wearily she sat down and ordered a cup of soup ~ obviously all that she could afford.

She said. "I haven't sold a flower all afternoon." The piano player replied that his tipping plate was empty. Not much of a Christmas feast, **only a cup of soup and an empty tipping plate.**

Then it happened! The sailor got up and walked over to the old flower woman. **"Happy Christmas,"** he said, smiling as he picked out two corsages. "How much are they?" "Two francs, Monsieur!" Then he handed her a fifty-franc note. "I don't have change, Monsieur," she said. The sailor leaned over, gave the woman a kiss, and said, **"This is my Christmas present to you."** One of the flowers he pressed flat and placed it in his letter. The other one he presented to the mother of the three boys and left.

"A few seconds later Christmas literally exploded throughout the restaurant." The piano player began playing, "Silent Night, Holy Night." The flower woman jumped up. The mother of three suddenly appeared twenty years younger. The Germans began singing in German; the French couples sang in French, **"Silent night, Holy night!"** A few moments before, these folks were having a miserable evening. Christmas came in the form of one, fantastic deed, by a sailor, far away from home! It ended up being the happiest, the very best Christmas Eve they ever experienced."

Immanuel, God with us! May this become the best Christmas you have ever had!

AMEN