

A Proper Introduction

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December 8, 2019. The hope of something better is the heart of what repentance truly means. Pastor Stephanie's message is on repentance, introductions, and John the Baptist introducing Jesus.

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Grace and peace to each one of you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Would you pretend with me, for just a few moments, that you are planning a special event? I mean beyond your Christmas dinner, as special as that is. I'm thinking of something in which you might be passionate about, and decide that you want to have a uniquely qualified speaker come, to enlighten people that you will invite, on a specific topic. So, you would reserve the Mead Center and develop a list of things to be done for the preparation of the success of your event. There is one key aspect that can be easily overlooked in such a situation. But it shouldn't be. You can have all the big logistical matters covered and checked off your list. But if you neglect one important element, the stage for your event has not been properly set for maximum effectiveness. Its importance can elude us, because it can seem like just a polite nicety that's added only to provide a little transition to the main event. What is this of which I speak? You probably already guessed it. It's the way that you frame what you want in advance for your audience to be prepared for, so that they will be ready to get the most they possibly can out of what the speaker has to say. It's a proper introduction to the main event.

A thoughtfully prepared introduction heightens the hopes and expectations of what is to come. It provides a context for understanding what will follow. Those who come for the talk, then, need to feel that they have made a good decision in coming, and need to be made ready for what is about to unfold. Come to think of it, I heard a very good introduction made yesterday by Jadee at the women's brunch. As she introduced Katie as the speaker, even though I knew generally what Katie intended to speak on, I found myself leaning in to listen more closely to what Jadee said about how Katie would deal with the topic that already interested me, and clearly the others around me.

Having said all of that, would you laugh out loud if I told you that John the Baptist actually made a very, very good introduction? Or would you just smile inwardly and think I must have him confused with someone else? Because I know after reading the gospel lesson today, there are certain phrases that can just stick in our head that don't sound like they would be part of a good introduction. "You brood of vipers!" Not so much. But there was much more going on in John's message than that. It helps a lot, I think, to view what he said as an introduction, a setup, rather than to view it as the whole message. He was clearly pointing to someone else, the One who would be coming after him. John saw it as his job to prepare listeners to really hear what would be coming next. His role was to create a thirst for what could only be quenched when the Holy One of God would arrive on the scene.

Now we may question his choice of words. But the power, the urgency, and the raw honesty within them was very, very effective. People responded. It says they came in droves, from all parts of other regions, to hear him set this stage, if you will, for the one whom he promised was coming to bring the full message. John's message of making the way prepared for the coming of the Lord was personal, and it transcends time. It is just as relevant for us today as it was for the original audience. Now here, we've had plenty of messages, especially since All Saints' Day, about how the coming of the Lord will make all things new, how all the corrupt will be wiped away, every tear will be dried, peace and justice will

reign. It's so easy to rejoice in the news that God is going to address the inequitable systems and the big picture items.

But this message from John, chosen for our attention early in Advent, is to focus on each one of us and our personal need. Praying for the presence of the Lord coming to us takes some internal work for each of us to be made ready. Lest we think we are pretty much already ready to receive him, John makes it clear that each one of us is in need of some wholesale change. When he says of the One to come that he, John himself, is not even worthy to carry his sandals, he's letting us all know that true greatness is about to appear.

Now the words from Malachi, well-known from Handel's oratorio Messiah, come to mind: "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? He is like a refiners fire." No, we are not ready for his coming, John concludes. Not even close. He dares to say that you and I are rehabilitation projects. We need the old ways cut away. We need to be cleansed by water and fire. We need some serious work done on us. Such audacity, we might think. He doesn't even know us. Or does he? Maybe he knows enough of the human condition, in which each of us is caught, to know that even on our best days there's some interior demolition to be done and plenty of rebuilding needed. This is how he says it: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Repent, turn around to leave behind the unhelpful, and be ready to turn toward something vibrant and full of grace and goodness.

Repentance often sounds to us like having to take the awful-tasting medicine that we had to endure as children. We don't like it, but it's supposed to be good for us. So we think it's about getting it over with, and then having some candy afterward. But John's introduction to the coming of Jesus was more compelling than that. Even in his harsh language, he was able to communicate that repentance leads to a chance to take hold of something far, far better than that which we are giving up. That had to be what attracted all those large groups of people as they hiked out to see what John the Baptist in the wilderness was up to. It wasn't just the chance to admit how bad they were -- it was the hope of something better. That is the heart of what repentance truly means. The word in Greek is "metanoia." It's turning away from something toward something better, a transformation of the mind accompanied by changed behaviors and actions, or in John's words it is bearing the fruit of repentance. When true, heartfelt repentance occurs, we begin to see our fallen inclinations the way God does, and we realize how deep-rooted is the corruption in our hearts. This awareness grows slowly over many years, because God mercifully deals with us a little bit over time.

But God sees it all. God's is like the eye of a surgeon which sees through to the sickness deep within. There is no other way for us to be healed. John says the axe is laid at the root of the tree. That's his way of saying some skillful surgery is needed on us. And here's the good news: God wields the axe. But with no harm intended, but only to bring healing and restoration. Seeing what we really are is a hopeful thing. It's hopeful because we're seeing ourselves through the eyes of God, who won't leave us where we are, but wants to transform us into being fully human, fully alive. You've likely heard the saying that God loves us just the way we are, but far too much to leave us that way. God has so much more in store for us. And far better than any self-help book can offer, where we're left to muddle on trying to make improvements on our own.

As we repent and turn toward God, it is actually God who is doing the work of transformation in us -- through Word, through the Spirit, through the cleansing water of baptism, and the nourishment at the table. With a steady diet of repentance, we are able to be prepared, more and more, for God to do more and more rehabilitation within us. And then our defense mechanisms, the layers of denial we built up over the truth about ourselves and coming clean, begin to be replaced by the fruit of the Spirit: love,

joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Daring to stand exposed and vulnerable to God, the skilled surgeon who cuts away the unhealthiness, yields something far better for us to receive than we ever have to give up. It's the wise person who begins to hear "repent" more as an invitation than as a threat. "Repent!" the prophet cries. "Come home." "Repent," God calls. "Turn to me." "Repent," we hear. "Walk into freedom."

Yes, John provides a lovely introduction to the One who is coming. He sets up our receptivity to the message of Jesus as he describes how great is our need for this One to whom he pointed, so that we would welcome him wholeheartedly. Unless we see our need, we cannot appreciate the greatness of the gift of the child born in Bethlehem, the One called Emmanuel: God with us, the One of whom the angel spoke when telling Joseph to take Mary as his wife and to name the child Jesus, because he was to save his people from their sin. He's introducing us to our need, as well as to the One who can cleanse us from all unrighteousness and make us ready for the kingdom of righteousness, simply by his grace and mercy. So, John the Baptist's message of repentance fits well in Advent. It's only in recognizing our need for the One sent to save us from our sin so that we can be open and gladly receiving the One to whom he introduces us.

Thanks be to God for this introduction, preparing us to receive the greatest presence of all time, that God is continually coming to dwell within us and to make us whole people to his glory. Please rise as you are able to sing the hymn of the day in response to God's word.

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