

Keep Focused on Your Coming Savior!

He was working in a machine shop making widgets. One afternoon, the machine jammed. He managed to clear the jam, but each widget after that was a little off. He turned a dial, but that made it worse. He turned another dial but it did not help. He did NOT want to go to his boss who would probably think that he was not a good worker. He would get yelled at, if not fired. Eventually he had to admit to himself that he could not fix the problem. He needed help. He went to his boss and explained, "I tried my best." His boss put his hand on his shoulder, looked him in the eye and smiled, "Around here, doing your best means asking me for help." Suddenly, he realized that he did not need to be afraid of his boss. He actually cared about the workers and was eager to help. We do not like to admit that we need help. We want to be able to fix our own problems. This morning, though, John the Baptist, or Baptizer, reminds us that we have a problem that we can not fix. We need help. He encourages us to keep focused on your coming Savior.

In today's gospel, Luke began his description of John the Baptizer by telling us who the political and religious leaders at the time were. That lets us know that this is true history and not make-believe legend. We also learn what the conditions were like at that time. All of the leaders listed – Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas – were corrupt. They were a reflection of the all the people in the country. Corruption was everywhere. They needed help.

God sent John the Baptizer to wake the people up. If they died without faith in the promised Messiah, they would be apart from God and his blessings forever in hell. God was concerned about them and sent John to them. John was the fulfillment of the prophecy from Isaiah 40 that God would send someone to prepare the hearts of the people before the promised Messiah arrived. In that culture, when a king or nobleman wanted to visit someplace, he would send his officials before him who would make sure that the road was clear of any obstacles and that the people were prepared to greet him properly. John the Baptizer was sent to prepare the people spiritually for the coming of Christ.

John's message was different than what the Jewish religious leaders were saying. They told people that in order to get into heaven, you had to be a good Jew. The more laws you kept, the better chance you had of getting into heaven. You had to impress God with how good you were. The common Jew thought that God would smile on him if he ate kosher, if he was

circumcised, if he went to the temple and offered sacrifices and donated money to the temple. Such a man would be trusting in himself. Such spiritual pride would be an obstacle, a hill, that would keep the Savior from getting to his heart. Many people think that they can earn God's favor by being good enough. John's message was different. He pointed out to everyone that they were sinful and needed a Savior. They needed to get rid of the sin in their hearts. They needed to make a smooth path for their coming Savior.

The devil and our sinful nature are constantly messing up the road for Jesus to get to our hearts. They do not want us to focus on our coming Savior. Like driving on a forgotten country road, we bounce between high points and low points. At times, we get spiritually proud and conceited, thinking that we have impressed God. At other times we slip into low valleys of spiritual depression and despair, thinking that God is angry with us.

As an example of a hill that needs to be leveled, let's say that you increase your offering to church or give a special offering for the fellowship hall remodeling project. You are glad to do it. That's great. But then our sinful nature rises up and suggests, "I bet others did not give an extra offering. God must be especially pleased with you." Then we are basing God's love for us on what we did instead of what Jesus did. A special offering does earn God's favor. We need to knock down that thought, that hill.

As an example of a valley that needs to be filled in, let's say you realize that you have been giving God your leftovers instead of an offering fit for a king. You feel you should give more. It's good you recognize that. But then our sinful nature tries to drag you down and suggests, "God must be angry with you because you have not given a decent offering." Then, again, we are not trusting in what Jesus has done for us. We need to fill in that valley.

There are all sorts of hills and valleys in our hearts that we need to watch for.

- A proud hill might be, "I go to church regularly. I've earned God's favor." A gloomy valley might be, "I have not gotten to worship for a while. God must be angry with me."
- A proud hill might be, "I read my devotions and say my prayers every day. I've earned God's favor." A gloomy valley might be, "I do not read my devotions and pray every day. God must be angry with me."
- A proud hill might be, "I obey the laws. I've earned God's favor." A gloomy valley might be, "I have a police record. God must be angry with me."
- A proud hill might be, "I rarely, if ever, have any alcohol. I've earned God's favor." A gloomy valley might be, "I've struggled with alcoholism. God must be angry with me."

- The devil is quick to dig stuff up from our past. We think of something good that we once did and feel proud. Or, we remember some shameful sin we committed and feel depressed.
- If things are going well for us, a proud hill can rise up in our hearts as we think, “I am blessed. God is rewarding me for being so good.” But when things are not going well, a depressing valley might develop in our hearts as we think, “I’m suffering and struggling. God must be punishing me for something I’ve done wrong.”
- The danger is very real for pastors too. If someone joins the church or attendance is up, a proud hill rises up as I think, “I’m a good pastor,” as I focus on myself instead of giving praise to the Holy Spirit who works in people’s hearts. If someone leaves the church or attendance is low, a valley of depression sets in as I think, “I am not be a good pastor,” as I again lose focus on Jesus who is always guiding and blessing his Church.

I could go on and on with examples. As you say your prayers this week, I encourage you, I urge you, to meditate on the thoughts of hills and valleys. Analyze your own heart. What are some things that might make you spiritually proud or some things that might make you spiritually depressed? Whether you are proud or depressed, you are not looking at Jesus. Like Chris in my silly story, admit that you are not perfect and need help. Go to Joshua, the Hebrew name for Jesus, for help. Keep focused on your coming Savior.

John also told us how to keep focused on our coming Savior. Luke tells us that John was (:3), “**preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**” Once he pointed to the hills and valleys in our hearts, he then pointed to baptism. In baptism, simple water connected with God’s Word, God gives and strengthens faith. We see and believe that Jesus is our Savior. We do not need to be afraid of Jesus. He is here to help us. When we remember our baptism and look in faith to Jesus as our Savior, he makes the hills and valleys in our hearts smooth with the forgiveness of sins.

When John said to repent, he was not yelling at you to DO SOMETHING. A lot of churches and people misunderstand this. I’ve heard so many say, “You have to repent before you can be forgiven and be saved.” They do not realize that repenting and forgiveness are a package deal. When someone is repenting, they are not only turning away from their sin, but also turning to Jesus for forgiveness. The same Holy Spirit who leads you to recognize your sin and feel bad about it is, at the same time, pointing you to Christ who gives full and free forgiveness. Repentance is not something we DO. It is something that God works in us through his Word. Repentance is the opposite of work. At this busy time of year when there are so many preparations to take

care of, the call to repent is not a demand to do something more. It is a gracious invitation to set down our work to make way for Christ’s work. Jesus gives us spiritual rest. John the Baptizer does not tell us to repent in order to threaten us or scare us. He tells us to repent that we might make sure we are spiritually awake and recognize our sins, but then we especially rejoice in Jesus who is coming to be our Savior. As Isaiah excitedly explained, “All mankind will see God’s salvation.” We want to stay focused on him.

Did you hear what happened last Tuesday to a couple in Ontario, Canada? They stepped out of their house at five in the morning to take care of their dogs when a polar bear lunged at the woman in a surprise ambush. Instantly, her husband jumped onto the bear, like tackling a football player. The bear then attacked him causing serious injuries to his arm and legs. As they were wrestling, their neighbor rushed out with his gun and shot the bear several times, killing it. The man is recovering well in the hospital.

Death was charging at us, ready to take us down to hell for our sins. But Jesus, our heavenly bridegroom, came to this earth and attacked death. That man in Ontario was willing to give his life to save his wife. Jesus knew that saving you, his chosen bride, would require his death. It wasn’t the claws of a polar bear, but the spikes of a Roman soldier that cut through Jesus’ hands and feet that held him to a cross for all the world to see and for God to blast him with the punishment that we deserved for our sins. Because of Jesus, your sins are forgiven. You are saved. Heaven is guaranteed. The hills and valleys are gone. That gives us a reason to relax, rejoice and enjoy the holiday season even if we are behind with all of our other preparations.

Christianity is not a matter of being so good that we don’t think we need a Savior. For the sake of God’s glory and the well-being of our souls, we strive to be good, but we’ll never be good enough that we won’t need a Savior. Nor is Christianity a matter of being brow-beaten and feeling so miserable about our sins that we despair. Yes, we want to remain spiritually humble, but we do not despair. Jesus is coming, but we do not need to be afraid of him. He is coming to help, to save. As you prepare for Christmas, keep focused on your coming Savior. Amen.