



Our Advent series *beloved* is about focusing on the greatest love story ever told, the love of God for us, His creation. God loved us so much that He sent His Son to suffer and die on our behalf. Christmas is a celebration of the beginning of that story. The Book Song of Songs captures the deep passion of those yoked in marriage, but it's also a metaphor for Jesus Christ and His bride, the church. Song of Songs 2:16 says, "My beloved is mine and I am his." That is how Jesus feels about us. God is coming over the hills to reach you, to save you, to bring you home...and to call you His *beloved*.

I WILL MAKE IT RIGHT • Matthew 3:1-12 • Tim McConnell • December 4, 2016

The Beloved is on the way; and he intends to name us His beloved. Today we meet a prophet in the desert, John the Baptist, proclaiming in the tones of the prophets of old: "God is on the way. Get ready!" After four hundred years of silence, the Word of God came to John in the desert and the people of God again heard a voice they recognized, a voice like they hadn't heard in ten generations saying, "God is on the move. God is on the way." The prophetic voice. It sounds radical, it sounds harsh sometimes but it's actually a loving warning. "I can see someone coming down the road, someone who does not mess around! Do you think you are in charge? Do you run the show? Who do you think holds the power? The Son of God is on the way and when He comes, He will set all things right." I've been resisting saying this all week, but it just fits. It's a little like that old song, "My Boyfriend's Back." My boyfriend's back, and there's gonna be trouble! Hey-na. Hey-na.

As a chaplain, one of my duties was to prepare Soldiers and families to reunite after a tour in Iraq. I held a class Soldiers were forced to attend when they were back in the U.S. but not yet released to go home. You can imagine how excited they were for that class, among all the junk keeping them from getting home! But the Soldier was away for a year or more, and I had to let them know home might have changed. "The family system learned to operate without you," I told them. "You want to jump right in, but things changed while you were away. There might be nervousness about your coming home. Go slow." I still remember the looks on their faces as that reality settled in. Not easy. But true.

Jesus is coming. It's Advent—the season of coming, of expectation, of preparation. The Beloved is on the way to name us His beloved. That's great news and cause for rich celebration and hope, but is there also a little nervousness? There should be, but not about the plans and the parties and the gifts and the budgets. That's not the source of the nervousness—or at least it ought not to be. The nerves come in that you and I are about to stand face to face with Jesus, the

Holy One. Are you ready for that? Am I ready? The writer Annie Dillard, although she lists her religion as "None" has moments of real clarity about God. One quote is a favorite of preachers. She said: "Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return." (Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, pp. 40-41). Jesus is coming and He will set all things right. If we really understood, we would be reaching for our helmets.

John the Baptist was handing out helmets along the river Jordan. He wants us to know a few things about the coming Messiah. There's just a few things John wants us to know before we waltz into the presence of God with our jingle bell hats and light-up sweaters and musical ties (all of which I hope to see in the next few weeks by the way!). We ought to know a few things to get our hearts straight, or at least a little more prepared. The Jesus we are about to meet is God Himself endowed with strength and might, power and authority, to execute justice. Fair warning, if you come into contact with Jesus it changes everything.

Four things: **(1) Jesus brings a Kingdom.** "In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" (Matthew 3:1-2). The rule of Jesus allows no challengers. When Jesus walks into the room, Jesus is in charge. No question. Fair warning.

(2) Jesus removes all masks. The people came out to see a prophet. One who acted like Eli-

jah and talked like Isaiah and the likes of which they had not seen for a long, long time. Some others came looking to be a part of the crowd. The religious leaders of the day seemed to want to jump into the experience because it was the popular thing to do. "But 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? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.'" (Matthew 3:7-8). Jesus doesn't want fakery. You can come honestly and openly, confess your sins and be forgiven. But fair warning—Jesus sees your heart and knows your motives, and He doesn't tolerate...well, He just won't allow His work, His redeeming grace, His well-fought work of salvation and forgiveness—He won't allow it to be abused for selfish gain. Jesus has a way of seeing right through us. Isaiah says: "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge..." (Isaiah 11:1-4) Jesus is not fooled. The joy is that we get to be honest. The warning is there too. Pretending won't cut it.

(3) Jesus baptizes by fire and Spirit. "I 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." (Matthew 3:11) Fire changes everything it touches. Nothing comes away from contact with fire unchanged. The Spirit penetrates our very being; it runs through our very core and changes us from the inside out. Fair warning—come into contact with Jesus Christ, and your whole life will change. Nothing will be the same. The way you see the world will change, the way you see yourself will change, your marriage will change, your politics will change, your philosophy of life will change, your parenting will change, your own desires will change, your...are you getting the trend? Once you belong to Jesus nothing is the same. The

Lord your God is a consuming fire, taking your whole life up to be refined and transformed for His glory.

(4) Jesus makes a distinction. "His 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." (Matthew 3:12) Once Jesus comes toward you and says, "Follow me," you are at the crossroads. You either follow or you don't. There is no, "Well, I'll think about it." To not say Yes to Jesus is to say No. And there is a difference. There is a distinction. On the threshing floor the farmers beat the grain and threw it into the air, and the good grain, the kernel, would fall to the ground and be collected; but the husk, the chaff, blew away in the wind. John's warning is clear and simple. This is going to happen. This Jesus is coming. Take a minute, now, before you find yourself standing in front of Him, take a minute to ask yourself—How am I with Jesus? Ask yourself, when I am sifted, when I am tossed into the air, will my soul be solid and substantial and fall into the hands of my loving God and Savior? Or will I just drift away like a mist?

The Beloved comes. He comes to name us His beloved. The Beloved comes with a promise and authority to make all things right. And He did come and set so much right that was so very wrong. Jesus came and inaugurated the Kingdom of God. The era of God's sovereign grace has dawned. We live in the age of open salvation and knowledge of God in Christ. We have the Word of God in every hand. We have the Spirit of God, His very presence, in every heart – but not all was set right. Jesus Himself said, "I have come, and I will come again." Not everything has been set right. So we live with a longing for His return. We work and struggle to fix things along the way, but mostly we just have a longing installed in us. Hang around Jesus long enough and you get this ache for justice installed inside you. You say, "I don't think I need an ache! I'm already stocked up on aches—and pains too!" But this is a healthy ache. We become a people aching to see justice, God's reign and rule, God's way of making things right for all, God's way of setting the world straight again. We long

for justice, but we also walk in peace knowing that it is coming in the end. As Isaiah said, right in the middle of a chapter longing and aching for God's justice, Isaiah said: "You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you" (Isaiah 26:3 ESV). Only the one who walks with Jesus can know this. Only those who know the Lord can at the very same time ache for justice and walk in peace. Because we know, we know, He has come, He is coming, and He has the power to set all things right.

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STUDY GUIDE **"I Will Make It Right"** **Matthew 3:1-12**

Start It

- There is a lot of talk lately about who is in power. Who is in power? Who is out of power? Who holds the power? Think about how that talk has impacted you. Are you more or less anxious when you think about "who is in power"? The truth is that Jesus is in power. His rule is not challenged. When Jesus shows up, Jesus is in charge. End of story.

Study It

- Read Matthew 3:1-6. Is John the Baptist a prophet? What signs are there that he might be a prophet?
- The role of a prophet is not just to predict future events, but to speak the truth of God and show the people a picture of reality. In this way, a prophet prepares the people for God's action. Why does John want the people to repent? What do you think John sees in the verse he quotes from Isaiah 40 and why does he think that's a good verse to quote?
- Read Matthew 3:7-10. Are you surprised by John's tone? What does John mean when he says "the ax is already at the root of the trees" (verse 10)? What could the religious leaders do to prepare for the coming of Christ?
- Read Matthew 3:11-12. According to John, what does it mean to be baptized by Jesus and how is it different from the washing John the Baptist offers?
- John wants the people to be prepared for the arrival of Jesus. What in his message makes you feel unprepared? What could you do to ready your heart for Jesus?

Pray It

Lord our God, even though we are stuck in our spiritual pride, lost in our overestimation of ourselves, constricted by our sins and disobedient habits, and wandering in a darkness of our own making, You resolved to come to us, to bring Your light, to forgive our sins, to set us free for a life of love, joy, and peace. Prepare my heart again to know Your loving presence, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Live It

To repent is not just to feel sorry but to stop doing wrong. Take one disobedient practice and expel it from your life—at least until Christmas, but maybe forever!