

God’s Unrefusable Offer

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

How does your family open Christmas presents? Do you open them on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning? Does everyone open their gifts at the same time like sharks in a feeding frenzy? Or do you hand out each gift and watch each other open presents, one by one?

However your family operates, here’s one thing that won’t happen. You won’t take a present, look at it, and toss it in the trash. When we receive a Christmas gift, we are curious to open it. We are probably even excited.

Our Gospel reading describes a gift being offered. What gift? The gift of readiness for the arrival of the Messiah, the promised king, the Savior. John was a prophet. He spoke by God’s Spirit and power and truth. He was preparing the way for the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

What a joyous scene our Gospel message presents in terms of its potential—yet also tragic because of what actually happened.

Here’s what happened. People heard the message. They heard the call to get ready. But most took the gift of John’s appearance and his call . . . and tossed it in the trash. They did not open it by opening their hearts to John’s call to trust in Jesus.

Advent is the time each year when we get another chance to avoid making their mistake. Advent is God’s gift for us to be ready for Christ. Let us pray.

Father in heaven, in all times and places your kingdom is at hand. You are right at the door. You wish to enter our lives, change our direction, and renew us continually through faith in Christ, the Messiah. Help us unwrap the gift we find in our Gospel reading. In Jesus’ name, amen.

In the next few minutes, I want to do two things. First, see why the people John preached to should have been ready but mostly weren’t. Second, think how we should be and can be ready.

So first: why they should have been ready but mostly weren’t. I say mostly because some people did believe John. They did accept that he was sent from God. So when Jesus appeared some months after John began preaching and baptizing in the River Jordan, they acknowledged Jesus as the promised king, the Son of God. Among those who acknowledged John were some who became Jesus’ disciples.

But most did not buy John’s message. They should have. Here are six reasons why.

1. A clear message. ² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” In that time as in our ours there was awareness of God. But for most people religion was a social custom. John was a Jew preaching to Jews. Jews believed in God.

But John’s message was “repent.” That meant make a change. Wake up. Cultural religiosity is not enough. Turn from your sinful ways. Let the Lord take away your sins by faith so you are ready to enter his kingdom. That means trust in him, receive his living Holy Spirit, live for him, dedicate your life to his priorities, show others the love he has shown to you. Grow in faith and worship and service.

Many people didn’t want to get ready because they didn’t want to repent. They wanted to hold onto their own direction and activities in life. In the end they gave John’s message a pass.

2. A second reason they should have listened to John but didn’t: God foretold John’s appearance. Notice v. 3:

³ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,
 “The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
 ‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
 make his paths straight.’”

Isaiah lived 800 years before John the Baptist - and here’s an important side note, FYI. We call him John the Baptist because he called people to repent and then immersed them in water, baptized them, as a sign of their cleansing from sin. So he was someone named John who was baptizing people. He was not a Baptist in the sense of being a member of a Baptist group like we think of.

Today when you see a Baptist church or hear of Baptist believers, the only tie to this John is that Baptists emphasize water baptism after profession of faith in Christ. They reject infant baptism. That’s not their only distinctive, but it’s an important one.

Baptists arose in the 17th century in England and Holland. John the Baptizer, we could call him, was a Jewish prophet in the first century. So here’s my point: today’s Baptists do not come from John, and John was not a Baptist in our denominational sense. Sometimes there is confusion here.

So as I was saying: Isaiah lived 800 years before John the Baptist, and v. 3 says that Isaiah foretold his coming. Actually, God foretold John’s coming. Isaiah was simply the earlier prophet who wrote it down. Now, can you tell me what will happen eight years or weeks or days or minutes from now? Not for sure. But God knows the end from the beginning. He knows what lies ahead. He predicted John’s ministry through Isaiah. That should have convinced people to receive John’s message. But most people who heard did not get ready for what John called them to prepare for.

3. A third reason they should have listened to John but didn’t: he was a standout messenger. V. 1 says he preached in the wilderness, which here means desert area. He didn’t preach in some

palace or temple like you might expect. V. 3 says, “Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.” He reminded people of Elijah in the Old Testament, who was kind of a wild man at times.

John got your attention. God didn’t send some slick salesman or boring priest. He sent an attention-grabber, a standpoint messenger. Still, many viewed him as a religious weirdo. God made him stick out so people would not ignore him. But they did.

4. A fourth reason they should have listened to John but didn’t. John had a compelling message. Vv. 5 and 6 say, “Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” He made an impact. A wide range of people responded. They confessed things they knew they had done wrong.

Do you like to admit you’re wrong? No. I don’t either. Nobody does. But some people act like they are never wrong. A recent president said he didn’t think he needed to ask God for forgiveness.¹ Most people in this country feel that way. If they decided they needed God’s forgiveness, churches would be full on Sunday.

John had a compelling message. Some responded. Yet we know from the fact that in the end Jesus was arrested and crucified that on the whole, not enough people said yes to John and then yes to Jesus for us to say, “Most people listened to John.”

But it wasn’t because there was nothing to his message. It was a gripping message. It prepared the ground perfectly for Jesus. But the people overall did not receive his message fully enough to lead them to follow Jesus. And that was John’s goal, not just to get people wet.

5. A fifth reason they should have listened to John but didn’t. He had a saving message. V. 7 speaks of “the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism.” These were religious officials who were monitoring John. They did not believe his message. They were the ruling class in that society. They needed John’s message most of all. But they opposed John most adamantly.

John was a prophet sent from the LORD God. He sensed their hostility to the LORD God. He offered them the saving message they needed. They opposed John. They trusted in their heritage as descendants of Abraham. They felt they were more right with God than anyone else. So John was mercifully clear in his appeal to them, in vv. 7–10:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

In their case, that was a saving message. It was the truth. They needed to see the truth about themselves. They didn’t and wouldn’t. Later, after John had been beheaded for his faithfulness,

¹ See <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-on-god-i-dont-like-to-have-to-ask-for-forgiveness-2016-1?op=1>

Jesus asked these same religious leaders if John's baptism was from heaven or from man. They lied and said, "We don't know" (Matt. 21:27). Actually, they did know. They rejected John's baptism as from heaven, and Jesus knew it, and that's why he put them on the spot by asking the question.

So John preached what God knew they needed to get right with God. He had a saving message that they couldn't accept because they insisted they were already right with God on their own, without heeding John's divinely given summons to them.

6. A final reason they should have listened to John but didn't. He had a promising message. And now John's message becomes a message for us too. Remember we're talking about the gift John offered. This was the gift of readiness for Christ. Most people then did not receive it. I hope everyone here in this Advent season already has received it. If you haven't, I hope you will, even today. John's message promises us the living God in our lives, not as a threat or a judge but as a savior and helper.

Great ready, John proclaims, for a two-fold promise.

1. The promise of the mighty one. Matt 3:11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry."

Don't think John was insignificant. Jesus later said this about John (Matt 11:11): "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist." But Jesus also said that "the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Jesus meant that his followers have an advantage over that great prophet John. What is that advantage?

Jesus' followers have Jesus. John looked ahead to the one mightier than he was. Jesus is the mightier one. Nothing is more important than that you have the right person on your side as you face life's challenges. We sing a hymn that recognizes this. It goes: "Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing, were not the right man on our side the man of God's own choosing."

The hymn continues: "Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus it is he. LORD Sabaoth his name, from age to age the same, and he must win the battle."

In World Cup play the US team advanced to the top 16 for one reason: they had the right man on their side: Christian Pulisic. That's football/soccer.

In everyday life there is only one person in all the world that can give you God's saving strength and peace in this world and the next: Jesus. That is John's promise. This Advent God's calls us to make space for Christ, whether for the first time or in a new way.

Through John God offers a second promise. 2. The promise of shelter from the coming storm.

John says of the mighty one: “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

During the Civil War in this country an anthem was written that came to be called the Battle Hymn of the Republic. There is a line in it: “He is sifting out the hearts of men before the judgment seat.”

John speaks of Jesus sifting out hearts using the analogy of a threshing floor. In Jesus’ time men would cut wheat, tie it into sheaves, and carry the sheaves onto a ridge where there was wind. They would beat the stalks with sticks so that the grain would fall off and the straw break into pieces. Then they would toss the broken straw into the air with a winnowing fork. The wind would blow the chaff off the ridge. The grain would fall back onto the ground, to be shoveled into sacks.

John says Jesus’ winnowing fork is in his hand. Jesus is clearing his threshing floor and gathering his wheat into the barn. The wheat stands for believers in Christ. He is gathering us, for salvation, for worship, for service, for protection from harm, in this age and in the age to come.

Because the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. That’s the age to come for those who refuse God’s gift. God’s gift is a two-edged sword: it is kind if you receive it, and the Bible says that kindness is meant to lead us to repentance, not complacency or presumptuousness. God’s gift is severe if you refuse it: Rom 11:22 “Note then the kindness and the severity of God.”

That’s why this sermon’s title is God’s Unrefusable Gift. God is going to do what he is going to do. Don’t be the chaff. Trust in Christ. Be drenched with the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the fire of faith in Christ, service to Christ, witness for Christ.

We need the LORD Jesus in these perilous times. John needed faith in Jesus. Remember what happened to John? He preached bravely and faithfully. But he crossed a line when he criticized a king who stole his brother’s wife and married her. That wife hated John for his calling out the king and his wickedness. The king put John in prison. Before long the enraged wife got her revenge on John in the form of his head on a platter.

We live in perilous times. The LORD is sifting not only hearts but nations. We live in a day of rejection of God’s law and the oppression of humanity on a scale the earth has never seen, in part with the help of technologies that have never before existed. Persecution of Christians worldwide is at a historic high and increasing. Human misery and suffering and death are staggering to contemplate. There are over 100 million people living as slaves or refugees at this very hour. Urban areas in this country are unsafe war zones.

Surveillance capitalism has much of the so-called free world in a deepening state of ideological subversion. We see this for example in the tampering with our children’s God-given, holy, precious identity as little girls or boys. This destructive tampering is being sold most of all by social media that did not exist until very recently.

We do not know what lies ahead with Russia and the Ukraine or China and Taiwan. We are in a place very similar to about 1939 when German and Japanese imperialism were on the march. It took a world war to deal with it.

Our greatest need right now is to put on the whole armor of faith in Christ. He is the mighty prince of peace. He is our shelter, whether to be spared misery as we are being spared here in this comfortable sanctuary and with food in our bellies--or so that we may be stronghearted to face God's winnowing when it overspreads us.

John the Baptizer proclaimed him who came, who died for our sins, who rose, ascended, and will return. God offers us here and now the gift of readiness. I close with these wise words from Heb 12:25: "See that you do not refuse him who is speaking." For to refuse is also to choose.