

December 8, 2019

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I wanted to share with you a brief story that I remember reading as a kid from the book “Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark.”

There was a man who inherited a house when his uncle died. The house sat on a hill outside of town and rumor had it that the old place was haunted. The man decided to move in straight away despite his reservations.

But late that night, the phone rang and when he answered it, a creepy voice said, “I am the Viper. I’ll be there in two hours...” and then it hung up before he could say anything.

Some time afterwards, the phone rang again and the same creepy voice said, I am the Viper. I’ll be there in 30 minutes...” and hung up.

This made the man quite nervous and he began to wonder who this mysterious caller could be. Before he knew it, the phone was ringing again. “I am the Viper. I’ll be there in 10 minutes...” The man was getting much more concerned now.

A few minutes later, the phone rang. “I am the Viper. I’ll be there in 5 minutes...”

Needless to say, the man began to panic. Again, the phone rang and the man slowly lifted the receiver and put it to his ear.

“I am the Viper. I’ll be there in 1 minute...” said the voice.

The man ran around locking all the windows and doors and then called the police. They told him that officers were on their way.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Shaking with fear, the man opened the door a crack and asked, “Is that the police?”

“No,” replied the voice, “I am the Viper. I come every night to wash and wipe the windows. Vere would you like me to start?”

I tell you that story because sometimes what we're expecting and what we actually *get* can be two very different things.

In the generations leading up to what we now call year 0, the Hebrew people were waiting for something. Hoping for something. Expecting something.

For hundreds of years, the land of Judea had been ruled by a revolving door of warring empires. One empire would conquer another empire and take over the territories it claimed as property—including what had once been the kingdoms of Israel and Judah—and then *that* empire would get into *another* big war and the ownership would *switch* to the newest conqueror on the block. There was a generation or two in the 2nd Century BC when the people of Judea *briefly* won their freedom, only to have it taken away again when *Rome* marched into the picture... but aside from that, for centuries the Hebrew people had little or no control over their own destinies. Their resources were stolen by the ruler-of-the-week, their holy places were torn down, defaced, or repurposed, and at times even the *people* were exiled from their own homeland while the invading nations settled in and put their feet up.

Stability was a faded memory, freedom was an expensive luxury, corruption reigned, and safety was an illusion. For hundreds of years those once-proud people lived like this, under the yoke of tyrants who didn't understand or care about the common folk on the ground. And across those hundreds of years there came prophets: individuals called by God who could see what was going on in the world at a deeper level than most, and who had messages from God to share with the people about what they were doing, what was happening to them, what would happen if they continued on certain paths, and what God wanted for them in the future.

In this warring, oppressed world, a tradition arose among the prophets and those who heard their words of a coming Messiah promised by God who would end the centuries of oppression and lead the people to a promised, just, and glorious

future. Now, imagine what a person living in a world like ancient Judea would have *made* of that promise.

Surrounded by great battles and conquering emperors, being passed around like spoils of war whenever a new King threw the old one down... you can imagine what God's promised Messiah was *expected* to look like. A new King to overthrow the Romans, this they knew would come, but *this* one would be different. This King would come up from the land of Israel, a Jew himself, one of God's chosen people who knew the plight of conquered Judea, and who would use the power and holy mandate of the God of all to *tear down* the foreign empires, dash their false kings to the rocks, and usher in a new era of superiority for the oppressed people of Judea.

God had anointed rulers in the distant past, after all. Moses, who freed the Israelites from Egyptian slavery and called upon God's miracles to bring them to a new land and destroy their enemies. King David, who slew the Philistine's greatest soldier Goliath with a tiny sling when he was just a shepherd boy. Even *foreign* kings had been anointed by God, like when God used Persian Emperor Cyrus the Great to defeat the conquering empire of Babylon, and who then allowed the Jewish people to return home (albeit under *his* rule instead of Babylon's).

In the world of hope and hopelessness the Hebrew people lived and breathed, they were trying to make sense of the promises of God. The promises of a Savior, of a kingdom to come, and of the irresistible power of the God over all creation.

And so it was with these ears that the people of Judea heard the latest prophet, John the Baptist, when he began proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven was near, and that he was preparing the way for a Savior that would be here soon to lift up and cast down.

The reason we're talking about John the Baptist at Christmastime is because *he* was living in an Advent world. A world that was waiting for the coming of the Messiah.

We live this month in our *own* Advent preparing to experience *anew* the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day... but the *first* time, it was John who lived his entire ministry baptizing with water and preparing his world for the arrival of the Son of God.

Now it should come as no surprise to us that what the people of Judea *expected* from a Messiah, and what they *got*, were two very different things. The child whose birth we celebrate on Christmas Day was nothing like the Kings who had come before. Jesus the Christ did not come as a conqueror, or a violent insurrectionist, or even a man of power. He slew no goliaths, he killed no slavers, he led no armies. In the Messiah that came, we had a Prince of Peace, not a God of War. And yet, He *was* the Savior that was promised. Even though he acted nothing like the Savior the people *expected*, the things he came to do were the same things God had been promising for centuries. Just not in the way we thought he would. Instead of perpetuating the cycle of violence, oppression, and power humans had been trapped in for aeons, this poor son-of-a-carpenter called for a different kind of revolution. A revolution where *love* conquers, not kings.

And the hints were there all along; we just couldn't see it. Psalm 72, one of our readings for today, which pre-dates Jesus by a long margin:

“May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.”

It's easy for us to focus on phrases like “crush the oppressor” because we think we know what that's supposed to look like: bloody and vengeful. Even John the Baptist did it, mixing his imagery of water and forgiveness with imagery of fire and axe.

But even John the Baptist was surprised when he finally *met* the Messiah he had been preparing people *for*: someone who had been born to an unmarried woman in a lowly manger, who arrived with humility as a servant of all people, and who would go on to allow an oppressive government to put him to death for the sake of all of us.

Psalm 72 again: “May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.”

Jesus planted the seeds that would indeed one day set the people of Judea free from Roman rule, but more than that he planted the seeds for a human race free of the war and conquest and selfishness that made us *need* a Savior in the first place. Jesus, the Messiah that was promised, showed us the *way* to the kingdom of heaven John the Baptist told us was near. Jesus, the “conqueror” they thought they understood, came to overthrow the old ways that had ruled us since the birth of our race... and—if we’re honest with ourselves—rule us still.

The prophets pointed us in the direction of the Messiah. John the Baptist prepared the *way* for the Messiah. And then the Messiah showed *up* and showed *us* the road to the kingdom of heaven. And Jesus’ *teaching* includes the promise that the coming of the Messiah is not a one-time event. In Advent we await the coming of Christ anew each year, but in a way our whole *lives* are Advent... waiting. For what some call the kingdom of heaven, what some call the reign of Christ, what some people call the *eschaton*, when Christ’s hope for humanity and the world will be *realized*, here, among us.

One glance at the news, or at the suffering in our own streets, tells us that that has not happened yet. Not fully. And so we wait for the coming of Christ anew in this world, whatever form that will take.

But we don't do it passively. We don't just *wait* for the kingdom of God. Just like when we deck the halls and string lights from every tree on the main road, we prepare the way of the Lord in our *hearts*, in the way we interact with *others*, and in the way we live our *lives*. We seek to follow the way of the baby who will be born anew to us just two weeks from now. To live into his example, to learn from his teachings. We should *always* be preparing the way of the Lord.

The difference between us and the prophets of yore is that we've *seen* the Messiah. We know what he's like! John and all the other prophets did their best to make sense of the words God put on their hearts, but there's no substitute for the genuine article. The people of ancient Judea were looking forward to something that hadn't come yet, preparing for a Messiah they only partly understood. *We* can look back on what we *did* get, and *that's* what *we're* called to prepare the way for. The Prince of Peace... accept no substitutions.

The Prince of Peace stood up for the poor and the oppressed. He exorcized the worst parts of people to make room for the best. He bucked tradition when it got in the way of doing good, and he *served* those who followed him. He turned down political power and easy solutions in favor of God's more difficult way. He embraced and uplifted those everyone else looked down on. He empowered women, respected the poor, fed the hungry, and taught all, holding nothing back. And in the end, instead of turning his followers into an army to slaughter the Romans, instead of calling down holy fire on the soldiers who tortured and killed him, he just said ten powerful words. Just ten: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

The baby we wait for on Christmas, who was born two thousand years ago, is born anew in our hearts every year, and left this Earth promising to return at the appointed time to see his work to completion... *that* is who we must prepare the way for. We prepare the way for the Prince of Peace in our *hearts*, and in our *world*.

So this Christmas, and every day that comes after... prepare ye the way of the Lord. Seek Christ, know Christ, love like Christ, and *prepare* a world that Christ can be proud of.

Amen.