

Title: Prepared in Hope by the Fire of Divine Love

Subtitle: The Holy Spirit brings the Kingdom of God to completion in our hearts and lives.

Video URL: https://youtu.be/-R_m6AGZoo8

The theme in the Gospel, and indeed in all of the Scripture readings today, is preparation for the coming of the Lord. This preparation is founded upon the hope foreshadowed by the Prophet Isaiah, who proclaimed, ***“For the earth will be filled with the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea.”***¹ This bright, hopeful future is also mentioned in our New Testament lesson to the Romans when Paul writes, ***“whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.”***² Then in our Gospel, John the Baptist comes along and gives this message of hope a practical application. John is a ‘tell it as it is preacher.’ He doesn’t fit in the box of a safe, well-dressed, predictable person. He understands his purpose and is living into his calling, and he isn’t afraid to offend people by telling them the truth. He wastes no time in declaring what matters most. He gets straight and to the point when he said, ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”***³ But the word “repent” has been so overused with emotional overtones that it has somehow lost its original meaning. The word does not imply that we have to have an emotional experience, although tears and godly sorrow may follow. The word originally meant “a change in one’s mind or purpose.”⁴ But this kind of change is never easy. Often the idea of changing our ways can fill us with a sense of dread and discouragement. When I was in my teens, I was so overcome

¹ Isaiah 11:9b

² Romans 15:4

³ Matthew 3:2

⁴ Strong’s Concordance, #3340 metanoeó (met-an-o-eh'-o), to change one’s mind or purpose

with addictive behaviors, that I could never see myself as living differently. But then, by God's grace, the hand of Jesus touched me and a change began to take place and from then on, I have never been the same. So now, when I think of a Biblical personality like John the Baptist, I can think of him as something more than an enigma. Now, he is more than just a mysterious and puzzling figure, whose message fills me with a sense of dread and discouragement.

I would be the first to admit that his apparel and eating habits were quite different from most folks, but the focus and passion of his life lent itself to a clear vision of preparing for the one who was to come after him. Consequently, people were drawn to John, not just because of who he was or what he said but also because of what he offered them—a chance to come clean—to stop pretending they were OK when they weren't. He called people to wake up—to turn around and make room for a new start so they would not miss out on the most momentous and important event of all time. In one sense, his message was a necessary preparation for joy, for "*the kingdom of heaven was at hand.*"⁵

I like the way that Luke's Gospel describes people's reaction to John. He tells us that "*the people waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah.*"⁶ When I read those words, the phrase that "all were wondering" struck me. John gave people a lot to consider. Since he proclaimed that the kingdom of heaven was within their grasp or reach, his concepts of repentance had a balance of practical applications and spiritual power. But like the wonder of a child that Bishops Bane described last week, we need to let the Spirit of God capture our mind and imagination.

⁵ Matthew 3:2b

⁶ Luke 3:15

When John used the concept of repentance in connection with baptism, he answered people's basic questions like, "***what then shall we do?***"⁷ And each group of people that came to him, whether they be taxcollectors, soldiers, or common folk, were given something practical to do?

Therefore we, too, should ask ourselves how we might need to change our ways. We need to consider what might be the valleys and hills that hinder and distract us from giving God his proper place? Or, What might be capturing our affections and drawing me away from the love of God?

When the Corinthians worked through the implications of repentance, Paul made a point of describing the fruit that godly grief produced. Their repentance produced:

- Earnestness
- Intelligent reasonings
- Indignation
- Godly fear
- Longing
- Zeal and godly jealousy
- Vindication- to prove yourselves innocent, and
- Preparation for worship with a clear conscience.

They demonstrated their godly grief when they were "eager to clear themselves and make everything right!"⁸ *For godly sorrow produces the fruits of repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted.*⁹

But with all these sincere efforts, we still need something more, which John acknowledges when he says, "***I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I***

⁷ Luke 3:10

⁸ 2 Corinthians 7:11

⁹ 2 Corinthians 7:10

is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.¹⁰

John knew that his baptism was, like the water in which he immersed was cold and incapable of giving life. It symbolized but did not affect cleansing. But the King who was coming would bring with Him the gift of the Holy Spirit, whose life-giving energy would transform lifeless matter into its own likeness. It would burn out the useless dross of hardheartedness and melt cold hearts with radiant warmth; “***For our God is a consuming fire.***¹¹ John knew that the same divine flame if welcomed and yielded to, could cleanse and purify; but if resisted and scorned, could also consume.

In one of his resurrection appearances, Jesus confronted Peter’s denial by asking him three times, “***Simon, son of John, Do you love me more than these?***¹²” In a similar fashion, when God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, the fire did not consume the bush but just gave off its light. In much the same way, our Lord does not come to destroy but to purify and rekindle in our souls a blaze of divine love. Peter’s hard heart melted when he realized how much he was still loved. It was a love he knew he could never earn. Therefore, we should ask ourselves, does the love of Christ burn in our hearts to cleanse us and make us holy? Has his love conquered, melted, and purified you so that you love him in return for all that he has done for you? Or will his divine love be rejected, disbelieved, and quenched? This decision is ours to make. Let’s make sure to give our hearts to him for the kingdom of God is at hand.
Amen.

¹⁰ Matthew 3:11

¹¹ Hebrews 12:29

¹² John 21:10