

Dear Friends,

The Nutcracker Ballet is back in Phoenix. It is a Christmas themed ballet. Advertising voices have been promoting it. One announcement tells us, *Live music is back! Ballet Arizona is thrilled to announce that the Phoenix Symphony will join us for all performances of The Nutcracker.*

The magic of The Nutcracker illuminates the stage with more than 150 performers, hundreds of costumes, and the beauty and athleticism of Ballet Arizona's nationally recognized dancers. A timeless holiday tradition for all ages.

"Ballet Arizona's 'Nutcracker' is one of the three finest productions of the nearly 20 I've seen across America." – Alastair Macaulay, The New York Times.

Today, we have a voice advertising and inviting us to see a baby in a manger in Bethlehem. This is not a performance, although adults and children will sometimes perform re-enactments of the first Christmas.

John the Baptist's voice is inviting us to take a closer look at our Savior. John will help us in our understanding of the Savior by drawing a contrast between himself and the Savior. We can also contrast ourselves with the people who came to see John. Some did not listen and were not prepared for Christ's arrival. We want to listen to John the Baptist's voice today, because **The Advent Voice Prepares People for Christmas.** There is nothing more important than being prepared for the coming of Christ.

1. Faithfully

As the crowds came to see John the Baptist some questioned whether John himself was the Messiah. He answered and faithfully confessed in a way that would help the people prepare for the coming of the actual Savior.

A. We are told that some of the religious leaders, the priests and Levites asked him who he was. (19) John faithfully confessed, **"I am not the Messiah."**

1. Notice that the Apostle John who wrote the gospel tells us that John the Baptist "confessed freely." In other words, he was very willing to tell people the truth. *"Folks, you may like me a lot, you may think I am special, but I am NOT the one your looking for."* Why would John do this freely and not take

credit for himself? He loved God and his promise of the Savior. It made him willing to forget himself and to promote the Savior.

2. The people wanted an answer. They continued to pepper John the Baptist with questions. They wondered if he is one of the prophets of the Old Testament era come back to life. John answered, “No.” He came in the spirit of the prophet Elijah, but he was not Elijah himself. John was faithful.

Predictably, the people were not satisfied with a “no” so they come back with a final question. **“Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”** (22)

B. John faithfully confesses who he is.

1. The Apostle John tells us that John the Baptist turns to Scripture for the answer. He turns to the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah had prophesied in chapter 40 of his Old Testament book that a messenger would go before the Messiah preparing the way. John the Baptist tells us, *“I am that guy.”* **“I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness...”** (23) When John the Baptist appeared on the stage of history, it was a sign from God that the Savior was about to make an appearance.

2. John speaks of the implications. The people must be prepared for the coming of the Savior just as they prepared for the coming of a king. When a king came to town, the people were to be on their best behavior. So, the people were to prepare for the coming of the Savior who was God’s Son and from the house and line of King David.

John tells the people that it was his job to **“Make straight the way for the Lord.”** (Isa 40:3) Kings did not ride on bumpy, crooked roads. The Savior King did not want to travel in the hearts of people that were crooked with sin and filled with pot holes of guilt.

John the Baptist straightened out hearts by calling people to repent of their sins. He promised them forgiveness of sin and guilt in the coming Savior. The Savior himself would make their hearts straight and right with God. In this way John the Baptist faithfully prepared people for the coming of the Savior.

Application: The Lord still sends voices who have been called to prepare the people’s hearts for Christmas and for Christ’s Second coming. If you have questions, you can ask them. God’s servants will try their best to give you a timely answer according to the Bible. Please realize though that the primary role of preachers and teachers is not to answer every question, but to do the preaching that straightens our sinful and guilty hearts. We need to be ready

for the coming of Christ. Those who have the faith of John the Baptist do the work faithfully.

2. Humbly

There was another religious group in the crowd not accepting John's testimony. The Pharisees arrogantly challenge John the Baptist's authority to preach. John humbly answers them. His answer helps to prepare the people for the coming of the Savior.

A. John the Baptist had authority preach and he had a mission. John the Apostle confirms this in verses 6-8

1. The Apostle John writes that John the Baptist was sent from God. Did God speak to John the Baptist directly? That is a question we don't have an answer for. John the Baptist knew he was sent by God and he knew his role. What we read in the Bible shows him humbly sticking to his work.

2. We are informed that John the Baptist carried out his ministry in the wilderness. This is the perfect backdrop for his message. The human heart is a wilderness of sin and darkness. John the Baptist had been given a wonderful message about the coming Savior. He is light. He brings light into dark hearts. This is important. John the Baptist makes it clear that **he is not the light**, the Savior, but **he is only a witness to the light**.

Remember those huge spotlights that they use to put around theaters when there was a grand opening. You could see the beam of light going up into the night sky. You knew something special was happening and they wanted you to come and see. John the Baptist was the spotlight alerting that the greater light of salvation was coming in the form of the promised Savior.

B. The Pharisees display the darkness in their hearts for all to see. The purpose of their question is to try and get John to stop his work which is helping people. John humbly responds.

1. He speaks of **"baptizing with water."** Was John hurting anyone? No! He was bringing suffering souls forgiveness and peace. Their sins were being washed away in the coming Savior. The problem is that the Pharisees were afraid of losing followers. They should have been more concerned about their soul. They too could have been baptized by John.

2. We know from the gospels that the Pharisees did not think they needed Baptism. John was aware of this. He drops a surprise on them, **"but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."** (26-27) The Son of

God is already walking among them! He would judge the Pharisees with his own divine words. He would call them to repent, but he would also offer them forgiveness. John was certainly calling them to repent of their arrogance and to turn to God for forgiveness.

Was John promising too much? Note that John says the Messiah was a person whose straps John was unworthy to untie. That is because he is the holy Son of God. Later John the Baptist would point to Jesus, of Nazareth, as being the Savior. When we look at Jesus we are seeing God's holy Son. He condemns our sins, but he promises forgiveness. Jesus did what John and you and I couldn't do. As God's Son Jesus was able to make the perfect payment for all sin. God's Son died for you and rose again that you might escape darkness and live in his light. Trusting in Jesus prepares us for his coming.

John the Baptist is a good example, not only of faithful preachers today, but of any Christian who calls a sinner to repentance and offers forgiveness in the name of Jesus. This is the work we are to do before Jesus returns.

Conclusion: We are told by John the Apostle in verse 28, **“This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.”** The Nutcracker is enjoyable music and dance, but it is not real. If you don't listen to the advertising voices, it won't ruin your life.

John wants us to understand with verse 28 that these events in the Gospel of John are real history. Not listening to the Advent voice of John the Baptist, and others like him, can ruin your life. He was sent by God to prepare us for the coming of the Savior. He points us to forgiveness in Jesus who is the light. He gives us a reason to celebrate this Christmas. Listen to the Advent voice! Amen.

Context: In the reading John the Baptist points us to Christ as the Light of Salvation. This prepares our hearts for Christmas.

Malady: John does not draw attention to himself. He is not the light.

Proposition: John prepares us for Christmas by humbly and faithfully pointing to Christ, our Savior.

THE FIRST LESSON - Isaiah 61:1-3, 10, 11

It is an astonishing thing that so many are not satisfied with the salvation that God provides in the coming Christ, the Christ proclaimed by faithful forerunners. For that salvation is like gold compared to the tinsel that so many favor instead. Jesus told the people that these words of Isaiah had reached their fulfillment in his coming and in his work. And in response they wanted to kill him! But look how beautiful it is, the salvation he comes to bring! One priceless gift after another, each one designed to bless us in this life and to make sure that we have what we need to stand before God when he comes to judge. **Will you be satisfied with the Christmas presents he brings at his first coming?** Or will you prefer the tinsel of your own will and works apart from him and thus be unprepared at his next coming?

(NIV 2011)

1 The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,^[a]
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,

and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord
for the display of his splendor.
10 I delight greatly in the Lord;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
11 For as the soil makes the sprout come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,
so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness
and praise spring up before all nations.

Footnotes:

Isaiah 61:1 Hebrew; Septuagint the blind

(NIV 1984)

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion-- to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor. I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.

PSALM OF THE DAY - Psalm 71 (*page 92 in the red hymnal*)

THE SECOND LESSON - 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 (NIV)

Cherish the message that comes from God's Word. Wrapped in that message are the most beautiful of Christmas presents, bought by Christ and carried to us by the Holy Spirit. The message prepares you for the real Christmas and for the real joy that God wants you to have in Christmas. It is the joy of peace with God even when conscience accuses; don't despise the preaching of that message as though it were old news not worthy of repetition. Test all the customs of Christmas in your heart and home, and hold fast to those that focus on Christ. Shun

the evil, the debauchery that many pass off as *Christmas Spirit*. The *Christmas Spirit* is the joy of holiness because of sin washed away. It is the joy of knowing that God is faithful and will not leave us or forsake us no matter what happens to us in this life; for the Light of the world is on his way, right around the corner, and he will not disappoint or fail to keep his Word!

(NIV 2011)

16 Rejoice always, 17 pray continually, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not treat prophecies with contempt 21 but test them all; hold on to what is good, 22 reject every kind of evil.

23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

(NIV 1984)

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil. May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

THE VERSE OF THE DAY

“Alleluia. I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you. Alleluia. (Matthew 11:10)

THE GOSPEL READING - John 1:6-8; 19-28

John was God's spokesman called to prepare the people for the Savior who comes in grace and in judgment. Especially those who came to question him should have known that. For everything that he said and did was in complete agreement with the Word of God. But they were not satisfied with John or with his message. In complete humility he pointed to the light that was about to shine when Christ would begin his public ministry. But they didn't ask John about that light. They just asked him about himself, and with each answer he gave they showed their dissatisfaction. A lot of people still just want the twinkling of Christmas tree lights and the glitter of tinsel. They do not want the Light of the world who will dispel the darkness of unbelief with the light of the gospel. They may want something at Christmas that looks a little religious. But they do not want to confess with John that they are all darkness and foolishness, all sin and perversity, until the Light comes to expel the darkness of unbelief and save by his works and not our own. What do you want for Christmas?

(NIV 2011)

6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. 8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

19 Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders^[a] in Jerusalem sent priests and

Levites to ask him who he was. 20 He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah."

21 They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No."

22 Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

23 John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" [b]

24 Now the Pharisees who had been sent 25 questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

26 "I baptize with [c] water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. 27 He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

28 This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Footnotes:

John 1:19 The Greek term traditionally translated the Jews (hoi Ioudaioi) refers here and elsewhere in John's Gospel to those Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus; also in 5:10, 15, 16; 7:1, 11, 13; 9:22; 18:14, 28, 36; 19:7, 12, 31, 38; 20:19.

John 1:23 Isaiah 40:3

John 1:26 Or in; also in verses 31 and 33 (twice)

(NIV 1984)

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light... Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of

Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" Now some Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.