Ok, we’re continuing to prepare for the arrival of God into our lives during this Advent Season. And in each text we’ve had, the preparation involves rethinking and reinterpreting some fundamental experiences of life. Often we run from what we fear, or hide from it. The Advent preparation is found in facing our fears. I may be afraid to call the doctor because what I fear. God begins to be born in me when I make the call. It’s in facing our fears that we begin to prepare for reality of God and the life he has for us.

Last week the lesson was similar, that preparing for God is reinterpreting the experience of being out of control. Remember Pontius Pilot and Herod and the rest represented power and control. But God came to John the Baptist in the wilderness. Outside of all that. we have some power and control. But in spite of that we often find ourselves a bit bewildered and uncertain about our lives, as if things are spinning out of control. And the lesson here is that in exactly this experience that Jesus was born. All the characters in Luke’s Gospel are afraid and bewildered when God shows up. Simple message. When I’m afraid and bewildered, it doesn’t mean I’m blowing it, or that something is wrong with me. It means I’m on the path. It means that God just may be doing a new work in me. Preparing me to change.

In other words, when God shows up, we’re knocked out of what we know, and Advent preparation is essentially preparing for that. And if that’s the case then our lesson today is just perfectly consistent with our theme isn’t it. John the Baptist rocks their world. You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? I doubt that’s what they expected to hear. But if you understand where we’ve been it makes perfect sense. We’ve been learning not to flee from what we fear, or what bewilders us, or what knocks us out of what we know. To not just get all upset about the rough and tumble of life, but to see these things in a new way. As the way that God comes to us. And John the Baptist is going to make sure that they get the message.

Often we come to God to walk around the fearful and bewildering realties of life right? That’s our automatic. Save me from what I fear or what confuses me or bewilders me, or scares me. Right. And of course we might pray those prayers. But Advent challenges this approach. Because here God’s presence isn’t really found in walk around the negative realities of life, but is found in preparing to face them. There is no pussy footing around with John the Baptist here is there? No coddling people. Life is difficult. And I think this is a really interesting and maybe even intriguing approach to preparing people for God. This going to be rough ride. But that’s where God shows up. Avent is preparing to get shaken up a bit.

I think this is a huge issue for our culture, and our church these days, and for our way of life. One of the critiques of our society is that we’re coddling our children, and by doing that we don’t prepare them well for the real world. There’s a lot reasons for this, and it’s not all bad. But now it seems to be going too far, and it’s like we’re trying to create this environment now where no one gets offended or hurt. Yeah, it’s like we think that we can solve the world problems by learning to be nice to one another and to create this environment of self esteem. And in the church it’s the same. We prepare for Christmas and the Christmas Spirit of love and joy and magic. You’re preparing to welcome this newborn child and it’s all soft and cuddly and warm and beautiful. Newborn babies are a gift from God. They do bring Peace and Joy and Goodwill toward all, no doubt. But they also turn your world upside don’t they? Preparing for a child these days is preparing for a tough road. Think what Jesus will do to you. Advent is preparing for change.

Take for example the Golden Rule. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. For some people that’s the summary of what it means to live as a Christian. And it’s a powerful message. Treat other people like you would like to be treated.

But think about this for a minute. How do you really want to be treated? Most people want respect. What does that mean? Sometime is just comes off as being nice. But is that really the way that you want to be treated all the time? Do you just want people to be nice all the time, and never upset you? To sort of coddle you? When you start to think about, it’s a really intriguing question for Advent. How do I really want to be treated? If you send you kid to a basketball camp, do you want the coach to just be nice? Well, yeah, but don’t you want a lot more than that? Don’t you want someone who will knock your kid out of their comfort zone a little bit? Toughen them up a little bit? If you’re a guy looking for the perfect girl, do you want someone who is just always nice and sweet and caring and wonderful, and always does just what you say? No. The more you think about it, the more I think you realize that yeah you want some of that……..but don’t you really want someone who would rock your world once in a while?

Don’t you also want someone who will contend with you? To get in you face a little bit? To challenge you where you need to be challenged? Someone who will stand up to you? Not put up with your garbage? Hmm, treat others as you would like to be treated. Have we thought this one through? Isn’t it true, that maybe we might want someone like John the Baptist once a year. To get in our face, and toughen us up for the battle we’re about to fight on Monday. Life is difficult and we need I think a lot more than nice in our toolbox if we want to prepare for God. The world might not be so nice to you on Monday. Are you ready? Ready to meet God there, in what upsets it? That’s the prep work for God here.

Everything John the Baptist says here, rocks their world, it’s all scary and bewildering. These people evidently believe that God shows up when you’re in right group, here it’s children of Abraham, but there are many ways that game is played. Many ways that people assume that they have to be in the right group or right church in order for God to show up. Nope. Your group identity doesn’t work here. Here, God takes people one at a time.

And then he gives them very specific instructions when they ask him what they should do. All of these things would have been radical departures from the normal way of doing business. There’s nothing here in preparing for God about believing, or having faith. Sometimes you can sort of hide out by saying that you believe. No one can really tell. It’s a private affair between you and God, it’s nobodies business. And it can get to be a bit of a hustle. No, get specific to prepare for God. Notice he gave different instructions to different people who asked. If you have two coats give one away. Tax collectors had to stop extorting money. Soldiers needed to be content with their wages. He is breaking in, getting them outside of their traditional patterns of behavior, and the consistent theme for Lent. Get outside of what you know. It’s an intervention. Some might call it tough love. Stop smoking. Knock off the put downs. Call your brother you haven’t talk to for a while. Each person has something that they need to do that is very specific. That would upset their world a bit, bewilder them a bit, maybe even scare them a bit. But it breaks the pattern it breaks the routine, gets you rethinking. This is repentance. And this is laying ground work for the coming of God into your life. I think this is intriguing and fascinating. And it’s a reinterpretation of the things that upset our ordered world. Here’s where we look for God to arrive.

There is a kind of default thing to do that is very specific Advent work. It does the job perfectly. And that of course is to just stop. I’ve said it a million times but it’s always been the traditional way of breaking the routine, and getting you out of what you know. Stop. Turn if off. The TV, the phone, checking your email, all of that. Stop. No. turn if off. See, that the Spirit of John the Baptist isn’t it? You crazy people running around everywhere. Stop it. Repent. And that’s the typical thing that brings up what we fear, it’s bewildering, and upsets the routine. Stop everything. Except breathing. It’s so simple, and so direct. It gets you out in the wilderness where you can meet God, and get your life changed a bit. There’s lots of other things, but that the defaults that comes with the Christian tradition. And it’s profound and does everything Advent is supposed to do.

Notice what John the Baptist says about Jesus. It just fits beautifully. What Jesus going to do when he comes? What’s the image. Yeah, he comes with winnowing fork. And you used that in the ancient world to thresh the gain, by throwing it up in the air and letting the wind blow the chaff away. See what John is preparing you for? The Holy Spirit and fire. It’s rough and tumble, but God will meet you there. And so, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good to the people. Peace and Joy, in the middle of a pretty rough ride. Amen.