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Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12
"Be Prepared"

The Advent thrust of this difficult passage from Matthew's gospel comes in Isaiah's words about preparation. He says: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. "

One of the Advent themes is "preparation." John the Baptist's emphasis on repentance is meant to help people to be prepared. It is to ensure that people are connected to God. He encourages them to turn away from lives that demean and devalue life as he sees it and to turn towards lives in Jesus Christ.

In a way he asks if we are prepared to live the life of Christ. Are we fit for the realm of heaven?

On my recent vacation in South Africa I thought I was fit to swim in the high seas of the Indian Ocean and I nearly drowned.

Suellen and I visited one of my favorite beaches in Durban. I had grown up swimming and surfing off these beaches. I had been a lifeguard in the wildest South African surf. I swim fairly regularly but hadn't swum for a few weeks when we arrived at this beach.

The waves were large and pounding near the shore. Surfers were riding the outer breaks. To me, the surfers' waves looked great for body surfing. Crowds of people were swimming near the beach. No swimmer was beyond the shore breaks. I wanted to swim to the outer breaks which I had done many times in my life.

I approached a lifeguard and told her not to worry about me because I was fit and knew how to swim in the ocean. I said I had been a lifeguard in my early years. She trusted me.

I approached the water, did my usual stretches and displayed my best technique in my diving under crashing shore breaks and in my swimming to the outer limits close to where the surfers sat waiting for waves. I wanted to ensure the lifeguards that I knew what I was doing.

The swells were heaving and tugging as I treaded water to stay afloat and to keep within the area designated by the lifeguards.

A huge wave swelled up and I expended a tremendous amount of energy to catch the wave but it slipped away from me. I swam back out and treaded more and suddenly felt a shortage of breath and I was being carried further out to sea. I was amazed how quickly I had lost my breath. I knew I did not have the strength to swim to the shore and began to feel weak.

Fortunately, young surfers were close by and I called out to them. One of them hurriedly paddled to me. Relieved for the support, I held onto his surfboard and rested my body. In the meantime, he paddled and I kicked towards the shore. He asked if he should hail the lifeguard. I said, "No."

Suddenly a massive wave loomed behind us and fortunately I had the surfing experience to push the surfboard appropriately with the surfer into the wave face and out to safety. By this time we had washed closer to the shore and I was sufficiently rested to take it from there.

I thanked the surfer and edged myself towards the beach and watched him take off on a beautiful wave as reward for his support. It took a little longer than I thought but finally my feet touched the ocean bottom and I was safe.

John the Baptist asks: Are we prepared for the lives we have in Christ? Are we fit for the realm of heaven? I thought I was fit enough. We come to Advent in various stages of fitness. Am I fit for the realm of heaven? Am I sufficiently connected to God? Is my Christian faith enough to keep me above the waves and turbulence of life around me?

The cutting edge of Christianity is that we are called always, and especially at times like these, to be prepared and not to presume that we are prepared. John tells the Pharisees and Sadducees: "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor...'" Instead, he says, "bear fruit worthy of repentance." The fruit of swimming fitness is to be fit. I presumed I was fit enough but I wasn't. This was a wake up call.

John uses harsh language as a kind of wake up call to those who come to him for baptism. Those who bear good fruit will live a good life and those who don't bear good fruit will be thrown into the fire.

That's not language I use but I appreciate his call to be more prepared for the challenges of life in this world and the challenges of Christian living. There are many ways to be prepared. John suggests repentance and to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

As already stated repentance is to turn away from anything that distracts one from living the life of Christ. I cannot tell anyone what to do but I can encourage everyone to live the Advent values of peace, love, joy and hope.

I like a situation ethic that asks what is the most loving thing to do in this situation. I like to check out my actions with scripture as best interpreted; with prayer, meditation and contemplation; with the counsel of colleagues, friends and family; and with the best my mind and experience tells me.

It is invaluable to be in a community of faith such as Redwoods Presbyterian Church. We know that we cannot go alone so we have each other, our faith and the guidance of the ages and our sages. Holy Communion, which we celebrate today, is a symbol of our communion with God and each other in Christ.

We come to worship as often as we can. We affirm with John that Jesus baptizes us with Holy Spirit and fire.

Holy Spirit and fire is in all our actions: When we attend functions of the church; when we practice our faith at home and work; when we read our sacred texts, pray and engage in loving actions.

We have a dynamic mission outreach and a heart that serves hurting people in our community and world. This is the worship that God most desires according to the prophets of the Hebrew Bible.

When we do these things we prepare ourselves for whatever comes our way. We will not drown and even if we feel like we are drowning we turn to God and to one another and receive support. Our lives, our families and friends, our communities and our world depend on it. Amen.