

The countdown is on with only 23 days until Christmas. You may have a list of things that you want to do between now and Christmas. There are some things many of us may have in common, others that are unique to you. For the next four Sundays we want to think about the things that we as Christians should all be doing to prepare for Christmas. The first thing on our list is “Listen to the Prophets!” Why, because they have some very important things to say.

Who or what is a Prophet? It is easy to think of a prophet as someone who predicts the future. The Old Testament Prophets predicted that the Promised Savior would be the son of a virgin and born in Bethlehem. Jesus fulfilled these promises. But prophets don’t just predict the future. Prophets speak for God to His people. God told Moses to give this promise to the people of Israel. ***“I will raise up a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites. I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell the people everything I command him.”*** (Deut. 18:18 NLT)

God also warned the people not to listen to false prophets, to people who only claim to speak for God but don’t. There were false prophets in ancient Israel and during the time of the New Testament. There are people today who claim to speak for God but distort the truth. God gave a simple test to know whether or not someone is a true or false prophet. Moses wrote, ***“If the prophet speaks in the Lord’s name but his prediction does not happen or come true, you will know that the Lord did not give that message.”*** (Deut. 18:22 NLT)

Applying this test today means we can dismiss as false prophets anyone who has predicted Jesus’ second coming that did not come true. We can also reject the words of cult leaders who change the Gospel message like the Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, Muslims and Unitarians. This warning also applies to those who deny the existence of God or claim that all religions are the same. We need to be careful that we don’t make the commercial celebration of Christmas more important than celebrating the gift of God’s Son.

The Prophet’s words call for a response. John the Baptist was the first prophet in Israel in over 400 years. He began his prophet message this way. ***“Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”*** (Matt. 3:2 NLT) The word ‘repent’ means to turn around or turn back to God. The people were facing tough times when John came on the scene. Israel was an occupied nation. So the people had limited freedoms and were forced to pay high taxes. The religious leaders of the day were more concerned with their position and power than they were with the faithfulness of God’s people. So they demanded that the people conform to their rules and rituals rather than their personal relationship with God. John was sent to prepare the way by calling people to turn back to God.

We certainly need to do in the United States today. We are living in a time that is a lot like it was during the time of the Judges in the Old Testament when everyone decides for themselves what is right. We have to be careful that we don't replace our faith relationship with God with rules and rituals, with simply coming to church but not letting God in our lives. We need to make sure that nothing else is taking God's place in our hearts and lives. Do we spend as much time on our relationship with God, listening to Him speak to us in His word, talking with Him in prayer as we do trying to get ready for Christmas?

If we are listening to the Lord and His prophetic word, then we know that we also need to prepare the way for Jesus. John the Baptist was sent to ***“Prepare the way for the Lord's coming.”*** (Matt. 3:3 NLT) We need to do the same thing by preparing ourselves for the Lord. Then we can take the next step and help prepare our families for the coming of the Lord. Do our kids and grandkids know that Christmas is the celebration of Jesus' birth? Or do they only know about Santa Claus and presents?

Do we take advantage of the Christmas Season to tell people about God's love for them in Jesus Christ? If we don't who will? If Jesus could risk His life to be born in a barn ruled at the time of a hateful monarch, why can't we risk a simple conversation with the people about Jesus who loves them so much that He entered our world to rescue us? It may not be easy. People may even think we are crazy. But what is more important, whether people are introduced to Jesus or they think we're nuts because of our faith? We should always be ready to tell people about the hope we have in Jesus.

Because of Jesus, we can look to the future with hope. The words of the angel to the Bethlehem Shepherds on the night Jesus was born were words of hope. ***“I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem.”*** (Luke 2:10-11 NLT) Our hope is not in a God who judges us, but in the one true God who loves so much that He paid the price for our sins for us. Our hope is that this life is not all there is, but one day we will be reunited with God forever.

There is a lot of wishful thinking called hope at Christmas time. People hope to get the gifts they want, they hope to be home for Christmas, or they hope everyone will get along with each other. Wishful thinking doesn't always come true. There is also a lot of hopelessness as people look around and realize that their lives have not turned out the way they want. There is hopelessness when we look around and realize that there is not peace on earth in too many parts of the world or even in our nation.

The Christians hope is not wishful thinking because it is built on the Word and Promises of God and God always keeps His promises. The Christian hope is based on the new relationship we

have with God in Jesus Christ, who is the Prince of Peace. Jesus gives us the Peace of God and Peace with God. Sometimes we can pass that Peace to one another.

Make and the take the time to Listen as God speaks to you this Christmas season. The time is right to hear the Good News of God's love for you and me and all people. Then respond to God's love by turning back to Him, letting Him into every corner of your life. After we prepare ourselves to receive the gift of God's love in Jesus, we can help others prepare for the Lord to enter their hearts and lives. We can live in hope, knowing that we have the peace of God and peace with God. Amen.