

Message Book – 2653 - 12/6/20

Prepare Ye The Way

By Bobby Schuller

Today's the second Sunday in advent, and today traditionally in a church it's considered the day of preparation. It's like what does that mean? Preparation is a very common theme in the Bible, in the Old Testament in particular – people are always preparing their hearts, preparing their minds, preparing their loins, preparing their bodies, preparing everything for war, for revival, for the coming of a king, for the changing of a guard, and today we're going to talk about this whole idea of preparation in the life of an everyday person.

And maybe you're here today and you are in one of those weird in-between places that we get caught sometimes. And you just feel like you've been waiting. Maybe you've been single for a long time and you want to meet somebody, or maybe you've had some thing in your life, an addiction, or some issue like that that you've been working on. Maybe you need a job, or maybe it's some family issue. There are these times in our lives where we find ourselves praying a lot – God, where are you? God, I need help with this thing in my life.

And it's easy to feel like maybe God doesn't care. It's easy when we're waiting to get bored, to just feel like we're in a rut. And I want to

encourage you to move in your mindset in this in-between place from I'm waiting, to I'm preparing.

There's something that happens in the heart, especially when it has to do with like getting up in the morning and feeling excited about life. When you decide that the spaces between A and B, that you're not going to just sit around and feel sorry for yourself, but during that time you're going to be someone who is preparing; preparing your mind, preparing your heart, preparing your arms, preparing your legs. Preparation is an important part of the life of a disciple.

It's interesting, I remember when Hannah was pregnant with our first kid, Haven, we were both just super young and we didn't know what this was going to be like, she was like a hundred percent sure that she was going to deliver this baby late. She's like my mom was late with all six of her kids. Yes, Hannah has five brothers; only girl in six. Anyway, and she was like totally convinced that we were going to deliver the baby late.

And it was about three weeks before the due date, Hannah wakes me and she goes Bobby. It's like two in the morning. Bobby! My water just broke! And I looked at her and I sat up and I went splash, splash, are you sure? And you know how when you wake up all of a sudden, like this can happen when the smoke alarm goes off at two or three in the morning, you're just like not with it. You don't know what's going on. And we just started scrambling and grabbing stuff and ran into the car

and it was just like out of the movies where this young father is like getting his jacket on and his shoes on while he's driving the car.

And actually it was very funny when we got back three days later, we both had Camry's, they were matching: one was silver and one was gold. Anyway. I'd kept going to like the other car to get things and when we came back three days later from the hospital, both the driver side door and the passenger door were still open. They'd been open for like three days. It had rained one of the days. Oh and the door to the house was open, too. So this is the state of the father.

Anyway, one of the most amazing things about that story, though, delivery was fine, everything was great, but one of the most amazing things of that story, in my opinion, was just that night Hannah just had this feeling. Even though she kept saying that the baby was going to be late, that night she packed all of her things and she had a backpack of stuff ready to go. There's something about that that I marvel at because there is something in our biology sometimes, especially for a mother that's pregnant, that her body just tells her, in a way, it's hard to put a finger on it, just somehow she knows something's going to happen.

And I think that this is very similar to the life of the disciple. There are times, if we have ears to hear, we have hearts that are ready, that sometimes we get these things where it's like I need to prepare. I need to get ready. Something great is about to happen. And maybe that's you right now. Maybe that's you today and maybe you've been waiting for a

long time, I want to give you a word from the Lord. I believe that now it's your time to move from waiting to preparing; to start doing things in your life to get ready for the next great thing God's going to do; to be ready for it, and to not miss out on it.

I remember when I was a kid, my dad taught me how to surf, and this was like a rite of passage for me. I was about ten years old. I looked like Wart from *Sword in the Stone*. Only serious Disney fans know, but just picture like a lanky kid, and that was me, like a Pinocchio without strings, and a shorter nose. I didn't lie that often. My dad taught me how to surf, and it was this important moment in my life, and it's always been a special thing for me. I don't surf a lot, and I've never been real good at it, but whenever I go, I really enjoy it. And it's amazing because when you surf, a lot of people think you're just constantly going, but you don't. Surfing.. a lot of it is about waiting. You paddle out into the water, and you usually go with friends, and you spend a lot of time sort of waiting out in the water for your set. So there's a social element to it that also adds: you're talking to friends and you're thinking about life, but you're always prepared. You're always sort of looking out at the horizon to see when the right wave will come.

Also, when waves come, they don't just come in one, like one wave comes, they come in what we call sets. There's sets of three or four or two. And when the right wave comes, you catch it and it's an amazing feeling. Surfing on a wave feels like flying. It's just an incredible thing.

When it comes, everybody gets serious, you paddle like crazy, and you either wipe out or you catch it and you enjoy the ride.

And can I tell you that when I've had real success in my life, it's been more like surfing than it has been like grinding. A lot of waiting, a lot of preparing, a lot of watching, and then when the right thing comes along, I paddle like mad, like crazy until the wave itself begins to carry me and then I enjoy the ride. That's certainly how I ended up in my calling here. That's how I ended up with Hannah. There are just so many times in my life where I've grinded away at something that I wanted and it just didn't happen. And very often, I'm glad those things didn't happen because they weren't near as good as the feeling of catching the wave that God has sent into my life.

I think God's about to send a wave in your life, but you're sort of sitting on the board with your friends waiting. Enjoy that time. Enjoy that time, and have eyes to see, and ears to hear. Prepare your heart and be ready so that when this opportunity comes in your life, you're ready to jump on it and experience something awesome. Some people will miss out on it because they're not prepared, they're just waiting. But some people will be ready, and I think you'll be ready and I'm proud of you.

And this is the spirit of advent. Advent is a season of waiting. Advent literally means "the arrival" in which we're preparing our hearts for the coming of the king, the coming of Jesus; preparing our hearts to see God do something great. The scripture Hannah read earlier today is

from Isaiah chapter 11. Now Isaiah was writing fifth/sixth century BC. The ancient, ancient world was a dangerous.. it's hard to understand how violent and how fragile the world was. You just picture that one king is constantly replacing another king, and that women and children are constantly being murdered and sold into slavery, and this is an era of human sacrifice everywhere; the abuse of the weak and the glorification of bullies and of the brutal and of the strong.

And it's into that world that God picks Abraham's family, a pretty weak and unknown little Semitic tribe out of the Middle East to become the family that will save the world. And they are supposed to be an oasis in a violent world where they're supposed to destroy idols. When we see idols, we think of the worship of idols, and it's that, but there's so much in the ancient world like child sacrifice and the sexual abuse of people, of children, and so there's all of this stuff around it, and then there's also the abuse of the poor. So it's always those two things: idols and the neglect of the poor. And Israel is supposed to be this community that destroys their idols, that cares for the poor, that lifts up the humble and that lives as a community of mercy, compassion, grace, justice in just a chaotic and crazy world.

Well the Old Testament is basically the story of that happening over and over where they're just and they're good, and then they're evil and they come under God's wrath. And then they're redeemed and they're good and then evil under God's wrath, and it's just this thing over

and over. Well Isaiah is a prophecy against Israel. He's saying to them you're bowing down to idols, you're harming children, you're harming people, you're neglecting the poor, and God's going to cut you down. His wrath is coming upon you. He's going to destroy this nation. So it's this very dark and brutal prophecy.

But then, Isaiah also says, but after that He's going to bring you home, He's going to redeem you, and He's going to bring out of you, Israel, a Savior, and He uses this word child, baby, there will be a little one who will come, who will be the salvation of the world. Well all of this happens! Babylon comes and they conquer Israel, and they take the people into slavery back to Babylon, and then they return home, but by the time we get to Jesus, that third bit still hasn't happened. Where is the shoot that will come out of the stump of Jesse? That's the prophecy. Isaiah 11: A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse. It's a tree that's been cut down. It's a dead tree. It's gray, it's gone, it's a remnant of something that used to be, something that seemed so strong is gone now. It's been chopped down for firewood. And he says out of that dead, dry, cold stump will come this shoot. It will be a person. It'll be a person and He's going to be a king, and He's going to be a child. And when He comes into your violent world, He will be called the Prince of what? Peace. In an ancient world, nobody's heard of a Prince of Peace. A king of peace. Everybody back then was the destroyer, the strong, the city breaker, the widow maker. These are real names of real kings that were their

neighbors, and into that God's saying there will be this king who will be called the Prince of Peace and just cast this beautiful vision of what the world could be like if it receives this king.

By the time we get to the Christmas story, it's been five/six hundred years since the prophecies of Isaiah. People have returned back to Israel. They have hearts for God, they love the Lord, but they're wondering where is this Prince of Peace? And there's this longing, this yearning to see this king come. And it's into that story that we see Mary and Joseph.

Now when they go to Bethlehem from Nazareth, that's seventy miles on foot. How many here have been pregnant before? Hopefully only women are raising their hands. That's a silly question. How many women? Can you imagine traveling seventy miles on foot at eight or nine months pregnant? They traveled from Nazareth to Galilee because there's a census and they have to report that they're under the sort of brutal reign of Rome, and the Romans are disciplined and they're strict. She gives birth, obviously, to Jesus in Bethlehem, and then Jerusalem is about a five mile walk from Bethlehem.

Now in those days, both the baby and the mother have to go to the temple for ritual rights in Orthodox Judaism. The mother has to be cleansed every time she gives childbirth because of the blood. In Judaism, remember in the ancient world, blood with neighbors is associated with human sacrifice, with all of this stuff. Jews try to redeem

the idea of blood as the source of life and so it's like this sacred thing that should be protected, cleansed.

So after the woman gives birth, she goes through a ritualistic cleansing and she has to sacrifice either a lamb if she's well to do, or two pigeons, while Mary the 14 or 15-year-old, whatever she was, gave two pigeons because she's just a teenage girl, probably poor. And then the boy, her new son, is named on the eighth day when He's circumcised. So He's circumcised, and they name the baby what? Jesus. Do you know the Hebrew name for Jesus? Anybody? It's Yeshua. Yeshua. Yeshua is a Hebrew word for salvation. Now this is going to be important in the Simeon story. Yeshua means? How do you say salvation in Hebrew? Ok you got it, good.

So the baby is circumcised, and then the baby has to be consecrated, which is just like a prayer and a blessing over the child. It's something like what we do here with baby baptism. And they go to the temple to do that. Now the temple was gigantic, enormous, especially for the ancient world. It was somewhere around one and a half million square feet. Every day there would be between ten to two hundred thousand people in the temple, so it was always full. Just picture like a gigantic fair but a sacred fair going on all the time with trading and food and rights and rituals, sacrifices at nine and three every day, holidays. So we don't know when, but it's just like always just tons of stuff going on. And so when Mary and Joseph go for these rights into the temple,

there's thousands and thousands of people there, and they're just like this young couple with a baby, doing what they do. They're Jewish.

And in Jerusalem, maybe on the other side of the city, there's an old man named Simeon, and everybody knows him because he's such a good man. The Bible says that Simeon was full of the Holy Spirit. That he was a righteous man and he was known to be truly good. In fact the Bible mentions the Holy Spirit three times when it mentions the person of Simeon. And it says that the Holy Spirit told Simeon that before he died, he would see the coming of this king, the coming of this Messiah, the shoot out of the stump of Jesse.

Now tradition says that he was a young man when he was told this by the spirit, but in this story, he's a very old man. How long was he waiting, maybe 50/60 years? And yet he's just full of joy, full of the spirit. And one day, maybe it's a Tuesday, maybe he's eating some Falafel. He's enjoying lunch, and all of a sudden this spirit moves on in him and he's like: Simeon, He's here. He's finally here.

Now I think that Simeon, the spirit says He's here, He's in the temple, go see Him. It's like Simeon gets up and he starts to run through the corridors and through the shops, and somebody says hey Simeon! He's like not now, not now. Begins to go further. Gets to the temple, full of people, and who does he start looking for? A man! A king! Right? The arrival of the Messiah, a 30/40-year-old kingly man who's there. Maybe a rabbi. And he's looking around, where is He? He's listening to the spirit,

following the spirit, and all of a sudden he sees this young couple and he sees a little baby, and he just goes of course. That's Him.

And then he walks over to this couple, everybody seems to know who this guy is. It's almost like the crowd parts for him. And he walks up to this little baby, not a full-grown man, and he holds Him in his arms, and he says this famous prayer: "Sovereign Lord, as you've promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace." What's he saying? I can die now. The total fulfillment of my life, everything I've ever wanted, everything I've ever hoped for has finally happened. I've seen Him. And he says "you can dismiss your servant in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation." In Hebrew, the word for salvation is Yeshua. He literally says my eyes have seen your Jesus "which you have prepared in the sight of all nations, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people, Israel." Isn't that a great story?

That famous phrase, by the way, becomes a Christmas song for the early church and then later a song of Compline and Vespers called the Nunc dimittis in which people sing over and over: Lord, you can dismiss your servant in favor, for my eyes have seen the coming of your Messiah. It's this idea that what St. Augustine says: our hearts are restless until they rest in Him. This idea that so much of human thirst and human waiting is waiting for the coming of Christ in my life.

I think one of the most important things that we learn from Simeon is that to me it seems like Simeon, who spent so much of his life waiting

for this moment, was still a very good, a very joyful, a very productive person. He was a blessing clearly to everyone. And I think the reason Simeon could wait is because Simeon could hear God's voice. If we become the kind of people who are not trying to move God, but trying to listen to God, to understand what He's going to do next, to prepare our hearts, to be ready when it happens, to be ready to just be okay being in that middle place but to be ready, to be prepared, I think that's what God wants from you and that's what He wants from me.

There's another person in this story, too, named Anna who when the Bible says after she was married for seven years, so again girls were married maybe 14/15/16 back then. Life span usually wasn't very long for most people. It says that she was married for seven years, and then she was a widow for 84 years. So how old was she? Maybe 100/103. And it says when her husband died, we assume maybe she was 20/19/21, something like that, she went straight away to the temple, and she never left. And she spent her whole rest of her life praying, worshipping, partaking, blessing people, and the Bible calls Anna a prophet. Everybody say she was a prophet. Let those who have ears to hear, let them hear. Those who have hardened hearts, let them be harder. That's the word of the Lord.

She was a prophet. She spoke the oracles of God. And she was loved by all full of the spirit, and the same thing. I love it. It's a very old man and a very old woman. When she sees this couple, she just begins

praising God: thank you, Lord! Thank you! He's come. He's finally come. And then goes around the temple just telling everybody – He's come! The child is here! The one everybody's been waiting for, He's come! He's come! And I just love this image of a 105-year-old, 102-year-old woman excitedly praising the Lord, full of fire, full of passion, spreading the good news that Jesus, that the Messiah, the salvation, the reconciliation of Israel, good news to the Gentiles, that He's finally come.

I think the thing we can learn from any older person that's wise, and the thing we can learn from these two people is that waiting is a part of life, and when we are waiting for God to do something, we have a choice to simply wait and do nothing, or feel sorry for ourselves, or fall into self-pity, or get bored, or move on, or we have the opportunity to prepare as a fighter prepares for a fight; as a surfer prepares for a wave; as virgins prepare for the coming of a bridegroom. You know the parable. There are ten virgins waiting for the coming of the bridegroom; five are prepared and five are just waiting. See that's the difference. God wants us to become the kinds of people when we find ourselves in an in-between place, that we refuse to just wait. That we decide to be people who say at this moment, I'm going to prepare. I'm going to be ready for when that opportunity comes. I'm not just going to sit around. I'm going to be doing things to better myself so I'm ready for this great thing. We want to move from waiting to preparing.

Finally, a guide. How do you prepare? In Jesus' day, whenever somebody would go to the synagogue every Saturday, before they entered the synagogue, everybody did a ritual bath called Mikvah. Everybody say Mikvah. See I want you guys to speak fluent Hebrew by the time.. if you go here for five years and you don't speak Hebrew and Greek, I haven't done my job. Mikvah. And every time, before you go into synagogue to study the word and to pray and to worship, you do a ritualistic cleansing. You cleanse four parts of your body: first you cleanse your head, that's your thoughts, you cleanse your chest, that's your heart, you cleanse your arms, that's your deeds, and you cleanse your legs, that's your standing and your going. And this process of Mikvah is called the preparation. It's preparation for the synagogue.

If you're in a season of preparation and you're like what do I do, think about those four things in your life. Prepare your mind. Have the right kind of thoughts. Be learning. Be reading. Be growing. Get a mentor. Be thinking up here. So check your thoughts. Check your knowledge and grow in wisdom, but not just that, check your heart. Do you want what is good? Do you love what is good and hate what is evil? Are you humble of heart? Do you have a tender heart? Are you kind? If you find yourself being hard-hearted or angry all the time, ask the Lord to do something in your heart. Ask your neighbor, someone you respect to give you advice on how to soften or have a good and right heart. There are lots of people with tons of knowledge that don't have good hearts.

So we want good thoughts and a good heart, and then your deeds. You want to ask Lord, is what I'm doing good? Maybe some of you are at a job you need to quit. Maybe some of you have habits that you need to stop. Change my doing. And it's also generosity. Am I a generous person or am I a stingy person? Am I a violent person or am I a person who gives mercy? Am I a bitter person or am I a forgiving person? Okay?

And then finally, it's the legs. It's the going. Some of us everything we're doing is good, we have good hearts, we know a lot of stuff, but we just don't go! Some of us need to go. Some of us need to go and just do something. Some of us are like leaves in the wind. We're just go, go, go, go, go, go, go. Some of us need to just stand and stop going. So ask the Lord about your legs. Should I be here, or do I need to go?

And I think those are the four things we really want to check when we're preparing for something good God is doing. Lord, help me to grow in my thinking. Help me to have a good heart. Help me have good deeds and help me to be where you want me to be.

And I'll give you this last prayer. I had a chaplain in college who taught me to pray for favor, that God would give favor in my life and I think there was a lot of wisdom in that. And this is the prayer he taught me to pray. He said: may I, Lord, may I be at the right place at the right time doing the right thing with the right people. May I be at the right place at the right time doing the right thing with the right people.

And so Lord we ask for that in Jesus' name. Many of us here are overjoyed at the good that you're doing in our lives. Some of us are here barely hanging on and desperate. For all of us, God, we pray, help us to be at the right place at the right time doing the right thing with the right people. Even now, Lord, help us to prepare for the things that are coming. Advent is a season of hope. Lord, give us hope. Help us to not fall into despair and to think it's always going to be this way, but to know that things change, and when they're with you, they always change for the better. Lord, help us to see that, that in the long run, things will be good. We love you, Lord it's in Jesus' name we pray, amen.