If all John the Baptist had ever told us was to prepare the way for the Lord, we might believe we had already done our part. We know how to get ready for important things. We tidy the sanctuary until it looks like a place that remembers God.

We lift out the battered box of ornaments that carry both memory and loss. We light candles with quiet hands.

We practice our lines for the Christmas pageant. We arrange the poinsettias and collect food to feed hungry people. We check items off the list one by one, believing that preparation looks like this.

If that was all John asked of us, the story would be simple. We could complete it with a shopping trip, a committee meeting, and a well-timed donation.

But John's voice sounds nothing like a comfortable December. It comes from the wilderness, shaped by hunger and wind.

He stands in the river, clothes as scratchy as an old burlap sack, eyes sharpened by solitude. He calls out in a voice that has no interest in polite edges.

Prepare the way of the Lord. Make the paths straight.
Fill the valleys.
Lower the mountains.

Smooth what has become rough.
All flesh shall see the salvation of God.

We know these words. They travel through Advent like a familiar birdsong. They sound beautiful when set to Handel and sung beneath warm lights. They feel nearly gentle from a distance.

But then the page turns, and John's voice sharpens in a way that feels like weather changing. He looks up and sees a group of Pharisees and Sadducees making their way down to the water.

They are part of the religious leadership of their day, committed and learned, each carrying their own traditions and responsibilities. They come with questions. They come with concerns. They come with the authority they hold inside their sleeves.

John meets them as a prophet meeting leaders from within his own faith. This is not a stranger calling out a foreign tradition.

This is a family argument inside Judaism, the kind that rises whenever faith meets power, and whenever prophets feel the weight of injustice pressing down on the vulnerable.

His words strike the air like a fist.

"You brood of vipers…"

He speaks this not because they are Jewish. John himself is as Jewish as the river stones at his feet. Jesus is, too. This is not about ethnicity or religion. It is about power aligning too closely with empire. It is about leaders becoming gatekeepers rather than guardians. It is about the way any community, in any generation, can lose sight of compassion when survival, politics, power, and purity concerns tangle together.

John's grief sits under his rage. He has watched weary people struggle under Rome's demands. He has watched ordinary families taxed beyond endurance. And now he sees leaders whose influence might have eased burdens, yet have become too closely bound to the very systems that caused their people harm.

"Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" he asks them. His voice carries both sorrow and truth.

He urges them to bear fruit worthy of repentance. Fruit that looks like mercy, not performance. Fruit that looks like courage on behalf of the powerless. Fruit that grows from listening to the cries rising around them, the cries John hears every day in the wilderness.

"Do not say to yourselves that Abraham is your ancestor," he says. What he means is this:

Do not rely on heritage or position or tradition alone. In

every faith tradition, power can become a shelter that keeps leaders insulated from the pain of the people they serve. John calls them back to the heart of God, where justice and compassion are not optional, but at the heart of their faith.

John confronts them as one Jew speaking prophetically to other Jews. It is a conversation that happens inside every living religious tradition.

Prophets rise to remind us that faith must lean toward the vulnerable. Leaders rise to hold their communities together. Sometimes they find themselves pulling in different directions. Sometimes they push each other toward a deeper and more faithful way of living.

John's words belong to that moment. A moment not of condemnation, but of truth-telling. A moment calling leaders to remember their sacred responsibility to lift, to encourage, and to serve.

Still, even as he speaks to the leaders, the ordinary people remain nearby, listening with wide eyes. They hear the urgency in his voice. They know the world is uneven. They know hunger, injustice, and fear. And out of their longing comes the most honest question in Scripture.

What then should we do?

It is not a question asked from safety. It is asked from the edge of survival. It is asked by people who know that justice is not accidental. It is asked by those who want a different world, even if they have no idea how to shape one.

John does not hand them heavy theology. He gives them instructions small enough to carry home in their pockets.

If you have two coats, give one away.
If you have food, share it.
If you collect taxes, stop taking more than is fair.
If you hold power, stop using fear to keep others in line.

These are not grand gestures. They are not heroic deeds. Yet they form the soil from where justice begins to grow. Not justice as a lofty, abstract idea, but justice as bread shared. Justice as wages kept honest. Justice as protection given rather than taken.

Justice begins close to the ground. In small towns where nothing stays hidden. In kitchens where unspoken truths rest like jars no one opens. In communities where tenderness and tension live together.

John's vision of justice is practical and relational. It lifts the burden from the poor. It places accountability on those with influence. It invites people to look at each other with new eyes. It breaks the cycle of exploitation that Rome and its collaborators have woven into daily life.

He is gathering a movement, not a moment. A movement of courage, decency, and shared responsibility. A movement shaped by the God who dreams of a world made whole.

Yet John also sees only part of the picture. He imagines a Messiah who arrives with fire and an axe. He imagines a cleansing that will level everything in one swift act. He imagines judgment falling like a hammer.

Then Jesus arrives with bare feet touching river water and a face lined with kindness. He does not stand apart. He stands among. He takes the judgment John imagined and carries it differently. He does not cut down. He stoops to lift.

Jesus becomes the tree, not the axe.
Jesus gathers the fire of judgment into himself.
Jesus turns wrath into restoration.

Then there's that pesky word *repentance*, a word we often hear as guilt or finger-wagging, even though its scriptural meaning is much more freeing. At its heart, repentance simply means to change direction—to wake up, notice where the path we're on is leading, and choose a way that carries more life.

It is less about feeling bad and more about turning toward what is good, which is why John's call to repent is really an invitation to reorient our lives toward compassion,

courage, and God's unfolding future. And because repentance is not something we achieve by willpower. If effort alone could have saved us, we would have been saved long ago, we lean on the One who turns with us and for us.

Jesus becomes our turning, our path back home, the steady presence who keeps us moving toward what is right when our own strength runs thin.

The cross is justice transformed. Not the justice of revenge. The justice of restoration and liberation. The justice that enters wounds so they can finally heal. The resurrection proclaims that death itself cannot keep hold of those whom God loves.

John was right about urgency. But Jesus reveals the deeper heart of God. A heart committed to renewal rather than ruin. A heart bent toward mercy. A heart that never lets us go.

Your baptism is where this story meets yours. The water touched your skin and named you as part of this movement of mercy and justice. You were called into the slow, sacred work of mending the world. Not from a distance. From where you stand.

God has placed tools of justice and healing in your life. They might seem small, but they are enough. Hands that soothe. Hearts that notice suffering. Minds that question

inherited harm. Feet that move toward need. Voices that refuse silence in the face of wrong.

Justice begins at your own doorway. It grows each time you show compassion over convenience, courage over comfort.

This Advent, this is how we prepare the way.

We prepare with fairness that costs something.
We prepare with generosity that changes the room.
We prepare with courage that stands for those who have been bent down too long.

Every time we act this way, the rough places smooth a little.
Every time someone is lifted, the valley rises.
Every time power becomes mercy, a mountain is lowered.

Christ comes to save, not to scorch. Christ straightens what is crooked through love that does not let go. Christ fills the valleys of despair with hope and lowers the mountains of pride. Christ enters our lives so deeply that nothing is beyond redemption.

You do not prepare alone. The One who calls you is already shaping your heart.
Christ is your repentance.
Christ is your return.
Christ is your rising.

Because of Christ, rough places soften.
Because of Christ, hope grows again.
Because of Christ the work of justice and healing is not in vain.

The Messiah is near.
The work is ours.
The victory belongs to him, which he shares with us.

Amen.