

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 11:1-10

¹ A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

² The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—

³ and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;

⁴ but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

⁵ Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

⁶ The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.

⁷ The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

⁸ The infant will play near the cobra's den,
the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.

⁹ They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁰ In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.

Romans 15:4-13

⁴ For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

⁵ May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, ⁶ so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

⁸ For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed ⁹ and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written:

"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing the praises of your name."

¹⁰ Again, it says,

"Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people."

¹¹ And again,

"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;
let all the peoples extol him."

¹² And again, Isaiah says,

"The Root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
in him the Gentiles will hope."

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 3:1-12

¹ In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ² and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." ³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'"

⁴ John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ "I baptize you with^[b] water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with^[c] the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Message
“Preparing Your Heart”

The season is upon us! Our homes are finally catching up with big-box stores; Christmas lights, evergreens, ribbons and bows. Our nation is breathing a great sigh of relief as retail sales for Black Friday and cyber-Monday exceeded expectations. And with last night’s Live Nativity community event, we as a family of faith began a series of celebrations which continue with this coming Saturday’s All-Church Christmas Party at the Shea’s home.. a party we call “Shrine and Dine”; a fun evening of food, fellowship, and a reflective walk through the lights and displays of the Fatima Shrine in Holliston. Our Fellowship Commission is busy coordinating this event, much as an “event planner” might do for individuals and companies able to afford such professional services.

If we had \$100,000 to play with perhaps we would hire someone famous like David Tutera, event planner extraordinaire for Oprah and many rich and famous people. Imagine what he would come up with, if we asked him to prepare us for God’s incarnation into the world! What a party that would be!

Well this morning I have good news to share with you; but also some bad news. First of all, good news; we don’t need to spend \$100,000 on an event planner extraordinaire because God has provided us one free of charge! But the bad news is that event planner is John the Baptist! And as one person commented:

“If we are not careful, John the Baptist can
take all of the fun out of Christmas.”

You know, that man shouting out his message of repentance at the Jordan River; the “wilderness man” who wears camel hair coats and eats locust

and wild honey. This is our “event planner”! Can you imagine his webpage; “John the Baptist: Event Planner for God”! This is who God has sent to prepare us for Jesus.

And the question before us today; the question that is always before us every Christmas time, is this: Will we let John the Baptist prepare our hearts for Jesus’ coming, or will we get lost in Christmas parties which so times often miss the point?

While preparing our lives for Christmas involves many tasks and traditions, the only way to prepare our hearts for Christmas is through repentance which begins with humility.

Is your heart ready to accept God’s greatest gift?

It was a promised gift; a gift to the Jews and a gift through the Jews to Gentile; that is, to all peoples. That is what Paul celebrates in Romans 15:

⁸ For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed ⁹ and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy

Is your heart humble enough to accept God’s gift of salvation offered to you?

To do what John the Baptist called all people to do, to “repent”, requires a spirit of humility.

- It requires the realization that despite our strengths, our strength is not enough.

- It requires the realization that despite our intelligence, we are not smart enough to understand all things.
- It requires the realization that no matter how much good we have done in life, we can never make ourselves a righteous people.

When John the Baptist stood by the Jordan River calling people to repent of their sins, scriptures tell us that

5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

The people of Jesus' day knew that something was wrong, broken, insufficient. They knew that their present religious traditions were failing them; that they felt far from God and far from the righteous lives they wanted to live. In this realization they humbled themselves by repenting; rejecting the path they were presently following and then, through baptism declaring their desire to take a new path.. a new direction in their lives.

These people were ready; they were humble and ready for God's new work in them. But not all of them, right? For immediately we notice that the humble in heart are contrasted by the Gospel writer from those whose hearts were far from humble:

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have

Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 10 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

This Gospel account calls us all to repentance; and sharply contrasts those who are humble enough to accept God's gifts, and those too proud of their accomplishments and position to see their need to humbly repent of their sin.

Is your heart humble enough to accept God's gift of salvation offered to you?

Do you know that:

1. Humility counters the destructiveness of self-sufficiency

I don't know about you, but I'm worried, for we live in a nation that is forgetting God more and more; focusing instead on self-sufficiency and self-preservation.

While economic and social factors have recently weakened us, we are still far from humble; we are at a similar place to where we were at as a nation in 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln recognized the need to designate April 30th as a day of national humiliation, fasting, and prayer.

With the exception of his specific reference to the Civil War, ask yourself if this couldn't have been written for today :

"It is the duty of nations, as well as of men, who owe their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon, and to recognize the sublime truth announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by a history that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord. The awful calamity of civil war which now desolates the land may be but a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole people. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us. We have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no other nation has grown, but we have forgotten God."

– Abraham Lincoln (1863)

Citation: Richard Halverson, "The Question Facing Us," Preaching Today, Tape 46.

What happens when people; individuals, groups, nations, forget about God and their need to live humbly before Him?

The scriptures speak directly to the issue; a warning first presented to the Jewish people as they prepared to leave their life of wandering to live in God's Promised Land:

Deuteronomy 8:2-4, 11-14, 17-19

² Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. ³ He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on

bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.⁴ Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years....

¹¹ Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day.¹² Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down,¹³ and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied,¹⁴ then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery....

¹⁷ You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me."¹⁸ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.

¹⁹ If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed.

A humble heart seeks and finds God and His blessings. A proud heart forgets God, worships the wrong things, and self-destructs.

Are you able to remember God and worship Him when times are good and abundant?

God wants us to experience His blessings, but more importantly He wants us to constantly rely upon Him. Humility counters the destructiveness of self-sufficiency.

Is your heart humble enough to accept God's gift of salvation offered to you?

Do you also know that:

2. Humility keeps us in God's will

You would think that Albert Pujols, the first baseman for the St. Louis Cardinals, would be anything other than humble. Pujols is a World Series champ, an eight-time All Star and the recipient of 3 National League MVP awards. In a 2008 poll of MLB managers, was the most feared hitter in the sport. Last year alone Albert Pujols made \$16 million!

But even more impressive than his life on the field is his life off the field. The Pujols Family Foundation supports people with Down syndrome and their families, while also ministering to the poor in the Dominican Republic. But most importantly, he is a zealous disciple of Christ. This coming February, look for a biography of his life published by Thomas Nelson, which details his Christian faith.

While speaking at an event at Lafayette Senior High School in Missouri, Albert Pujols' humility amid his accomplishments became evident as he told an audience of men and young boys,

"As a Christian, I am called to live a holy life. My standard for living is set by God, not by the world. I am responsible for growing and sharing the gospel."

After reading Paul's words in Philippians 2:3—"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves"—Pujols told the crowd,

"One way for me to stay satisfied in Jesus is for me to stay humble. Humility is getting on your knees and staying in God's will—

what he wants for me, not what the world wants."

He added: "It would be easy to go out and do whatever I want, but those things only satisfy the flesh for a moment. Jesus satisfies my soul forever."

Source: Tim Ellsworth, "Holy Hitter," World magazine (2-27-10) (modified)

If you need more great examples of God accomplishing amazing things through the humble-hearted, just open your Bible.

- Read of Moses who became ready to be used for God's purposes only after he was humbled.
- Read of King David, who when confronted by Nathan with his sin, humbled himself and cried out for God's forgiveness.
- And as you read of Jesus, noting how even He lived.

As the Apostle Paul described Jesus:

Philippians 2:6-8

⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!

The Bible's message is clear concerning God and those who come with humble hearts;

Psalm 25:9

*⁹ He guides the humble in what is right
and teaches them his way.*

Proverbs 3:34

*³⁴ He mocks proud mockers
but shows favor to the humble and oppressed.*

This is true for individuals, for religious leaders and faith communities. In fact it is true for any group seeking after God and His will. As proclaimed in

2 Chronicles 7:14

14 if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

In humility repent. Discover the salvation of God even as you yield your life to His will.

If you remember nothing else from today's message, remember this... God's sincere & heartfelt request, that each of us add to our "Christmas List" one item; a humble heart. Because it will only be with a humble heart that we can receive what God wants to give us this

Christmas. God's gifts of His presence with us, and His salvation for us come only to those humble enough to recognize their need of them.

Don't get lost in Christmas parties which have lost the meaning of Christmas. Remember John's call for repentance, and humbly prepare your heart to receive Jesus.

AMEN

THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2010 by Biblica, Inc.™
Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.