

I. Intro:

A. As we approach Xmas, in Hollywood 'tis the movie season

1. Summer and Xmas time are when the movie makers roll out their new films hoping for a box-office smash
2. Some films tell the heartening story of the main character without giving us a real villain to react against
3. But if you go for fantasy or adventure films, it seems there's not much of a storyline unless the protagonist has some opponent or bad person who makes life tough for them

B. Most compelling movies or stories have some character you don't like (not totally evil, but definitely unpleasant, mean & hard to identify with). Think of some of the bigger film series of our time:

1. In "Lord of the Rings" trilogy... creature Gollum
2. in the original "Star Wars" trilogy ... Darth Vader

C. Fagin from Dickens' "Oliver Twist"



1. Greedy unscrupulous ringleader of a band of juvenile pickpockets in 19th C. London
 - a) Organizes & directs the boys ... Skims \$ off their loot ...
 - b) Does begin to have a heart for young orphaned Oliver ... some tender spots leak out from this crusty criminal
2. YET Fagin basically a despicable man responsible for corrupting young boys into a life of crime
 - a) If you are one who prefers sweet feel-good stories, these are the characters that you wonder why they have to be in the story
 - b) It's even harder when even the "bad guys" have charming features, and there's nobody you can easily identify with

D. When it comes to the Advent season, the Bible story leading up to Jesus' birth also has one of these characters who's unappealing to us today: John the Baptist



E.

1. This is a 20th C. artist's rendering ... Although no one's face is actually colored like this, I like it because it's kind of wild & bold & unsettling ... just like John was
2. For those who prefer sweet feel-good Bible stories, this is 1 character we wish the divine playwright had left out of the script
3. If we're honest: John = 1 of reasons some Xians don't like Advent as much as Xmas
 - a) A major reason many Xians don't want to have to bother listening to John the Baptist every year when they'd rather be celebrating Xmas.
 - b) A reason some would prefer yet today skipping Advent & jumping straight to Xmas
 - c) I mean, really: When you can celebrate a new baby who brings new life and "joy to the world", why would you listen to some harsh hillbilly type haranguing you about repentance?

II. It kind of begs Q "Why should we let this killjoy John spoil our Xmas party every year?"

A. To begin with, Jesus didn't just drop down into Mary's life from a historical vacuum: **the events leading up to that 1st Xmas were foretold in O.T. by various prophets.** 1 of those was Malachi

1. Book of Malachi written almost 500 years before Jesus' birth
 - a) Malachi prophesied of a forerunner/messenger who would come before the returning Lord
 - (1) It was one who would refine like fire ... Cleanse like soap
 - (2) One who would shake things up ... a disturbing & not

necessarily popular figure, but one whose efforts would lead to renewed righteousness among God's people

- b) Indeed we believe John was that forerunner ... the messenger pointing ahead to God's Messiah ...
- c) but like it was described in Malachi, many of the religious leaders who should have been happiest to welcome him as a fulfillment of prophecy ... they actually "couldn't endure the day of his coming"!
- d) ... because John was more than just an announcer. He was more than a prelude to the main event:

2. John's message itself is part & parcel of Xmas story

- a) He wasn't just out there blandly saying, "Hey, folks, the feature presentation's about to begin!"
- b) He didn't just announce that valleys would be filled & hills were about to be leveled ... he started up the bulldozer himself to begin making that road straight!

B. Problem for many of us: We want nothing to do w/ this earthmoving road preparation!

1. We want to take backroads & shortcuts to Jesus @ Xmas time ...

- a) Think of all the nativity sets you've ever seen: Did you ever see a wild-looking wilderness man w/ a pointed finger standing out in front of



the crèche? NO

- (1) You'd be correct to say that chronologically, historically that's impossible (John was a baby when Jesus was a baby)
- (2) But if we're so concerned about chronological accuracy, then we shouldn't be placing wise men in our nativity sets beside the shepherds!
- (3) Here's a challenge for you these coming weeks: Is anyone daring enough to take your lovely nativity set at home & add a rough-looking cave man-type figure into it?

(4) I looked in some stores locally for a figure like this, so I could slip him into our nativity set in the foyer. I can't believe it's not a hot-selling action figure this year!

b) Point is: we separate Jesus the man, the savior & his message from much of our celebrations of Xmas ...

(1) John the ragged & rough wilderness preacher prepared the way for Jesus of Nazareth the itinerant preacher & healer to do God's saving work

(2) But we prefer to see a cute harmless baby in a manger, because that baby does not confront our sin

2. Elizabeth Achtemeier (preaching prof. @ Union Theol. Sem. In VA) has said, *"In order to get to Bethlehem, we have to get past John the Baptist."* ... I think she's right

III. (The way to prepare for Xmas)

A. But that's a message you won't get from the popular observance of Xmas

1. How many life-size cardboard figures of John the Baptist have you seen in the mall or at Wal-Mart?

2. The world tells us Xmas = "Santa Claus is coming to town"

a) ... world doesn't use term "Advent" for 4 weeks before Xmas ... rather it's the "Holiday shopping season", which starts earlier every year

b) World tells us the way to be ready for Santa's coming is to "be good, for goodness' sake" ... AND to get your shopping done early.

B. The Bible does give us guidance for how to prepare for Christmas

1. That forerunner of the central figure of Xmas came w/ instructions for how we are to prepare the Lord's way

2. Acc. To John, the way we prepare for the Lord is NOT with culturally defined traditions which didn't exist in his time, things like

a) "Decking the halls w/ boughs of holly"

b) listening to lots of religious Xmas music

c) CERTAINLY NOT waiting to see if Santa judges us "naughty or nice"

3. In John the Baptist's message, every one of us is already on the "naughty" list -- repentance is how we prepare the way

4. Friends, repentance for the forgiveness of our sins through Jesus

is the road to Bethlehem ... & John the Baptist is our tour guide

IV. (Not an entitlement)

A. Pastor George Hunt once wrote re. the message of John the Baptist in Advent: "In John's terms, we have no right to Xmas except for the mercy of God in Jesus Christ."

1. Here's where some of us Xians may need a subtle attitude adjustment re. Xmas ... Is Xmas for you a "right" ... or a gift?

a) As a kid I always looked forward to Xmas ...

(1) the beautiful music, the candy & cookies & food, the lights & candles, the excitement & of course the presents!

(2) Parents didn't have lots of money & didn't spend lavishly on us kids @ Xmas, but at least I knew I could expect to get some new toys at this time of year.

(3) Whether I was "good" or not, Xmas would still come anyway!

b) Sometimes this expectation carries over into how we adults approach Christmas:

(1) In our desire to be humane & compassionate, we support excellent local charity drives giving away toys, coats, food to needy people. That is good, & it's appropriate.

(2) But as we do so, we often proclaim platitudes like "Every child deserves a joyous Xmas filled with wonder"

(3) Really? That message may be culturally true, but it does not align with the biblical message.

c) Biblically speaking, no child (or adult) deserves Xmas at all! None of us does. Xmas is not an entitlement!

2. The wild man in the wilderness won't let us forget how badly we need forgiveness

3. Could it be that we risk coming unworthy to Bethlehem IF

a) ... we have taken God's love thru J.C. for granted?

b) ... we have not 1st examined our own sins & repented?

B. What sins? What do we need to repent of?

1. Overspending on gifts

a) I remember a song sung some years ago @ BCS choir concert "The size of your heart is the size of your life" ...

b) Some of us may be tempted to believe the fallacy that "The size of your Xmas expenses is the size of your love"

2. Sin of lack of discipline to cut anything out

a) Some of us fill our lives so full in this season that we're constantly exhausted ...

b) We tend to add more & more events to calendars earlier & earlier ...
Do we ever cut back or cut out anything? Sometimes leads to another:

3. Sin of missing Jesus in the flurry of holiday activities

a) We can miss Jesus by allowing Christmas to be dictated more by North American culture than by biblical content

b) It may happen when we fail to build spiritual components into our Xmas routines ... It can be hard to find Christ in Christmas if we hardly ever pray ... if we never read our Bibles or some Christian devotional

c) Here's a question to ask yourself as you think of your cherished family holiday traditions – *Are they only about presents, special foods & socializing?* Do any of your traditions include Scripture or Xian songs?

(1) Encourage you to establish traditions that explicitly reflect your faith ... don't let society dictate all your Xmas practices!

(2) If around on Christmas Eve, consider making it a priority to attend our Christmas Eve service This year @ 8:30 pm so you can even have a family meal together, then conclude your evening with a candlelight service before you go to bed!

4. Sin of greed or self-centered thinking ...

a) so easy to be wrapped up in our own problems & our own to-do lists that we fail to even think of the needs of the poor & less fortunate ...

b) I'm grateful that these accumulating relief kits are evidence to the contrary!

C. Message of John Baptist reminds me of a Calvin & Hobbes cartoon by Bill Watterson

1. Calvin says to his tiger friend Hobbes, "I feel bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I'm sorry I did it."

a) Hobbes tells him, "Maybe you should apologize to her."

b) Calvin thinks about this for a little and says, "I keep hoping for a less obvious solution."

2. If we want to fully receive the Christ child @ Xmas, the obvious solution is to pay attention to stories leading up to his birth ... stories of John the Baptist that call us to prepare the way for the Lord



3. The obvious solution is for us to learn from John and accept him as part of the larger story of Christmas

V. Conclusion

A. (Called by another road)

1. Secular society's road to Xmas may encourage kindness & generosity, but it doesn't call for repentance from sin. In fact, it often doesn't go through Bethlehem at all.
2. God calls us by another road, the road of righteousness & faith in J.C., God's Son. This road does go thru Bethlehem, a road that helps us declare, as our Advent theme does, "The LORD is our righteousness."

B. BUT ... "In order to get to Bethlehem we have to get past John the Baptist"

1. John reminds us that Xmas is not an entitlement that we deserve ... it's purely a gift from God
2. Malachi prophesied that the LORD's messenger would be a refiner and purifier before the LORD's coming
3. The very repentance to which John calls us is also what purifies us ... In that way, we can receive the holy child with joy and integrity

C. Invite you to a time of reflection, confession & repentance as we sit in silence and Elvina leads us into our response song (#8 in the purple song book)