

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Closing the Gap**

Matthew 3:1-12

The Christmas season is full of gaps. There's the gap between the total cost of the items on your Christmas list and the amount of money you actually have to spend. There's the gap between how many holiday events you want to participate in and how much time you actually have. There's the gap between how you imagine your child will perform on stage at the school holiday program and how he or she actually behaves. There's the gap between how much holiday baking you plan to do and how much you actually get done. As I said, the Christmas season is full of gaps.

One of the hardest gaps for us to deal with this time of the year is simply our overall vision of what Christmas will be like compared to how it actually turns out. "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas / Just like the ones I used to know / Where the treetops glisten, and children listen / To hear sleigh bells in the snow." That's a beautiful sentiment, accompanied by lovely music. But when was the last time you actually experienced a Christmas like that?

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to sneak in like the Grinch, hoping to steal your Christmas and silence your joy. I really do want you to experience Christmas in a way that uplifts you and elevates your aspirations. But I also want to encourage realistic expectations about what the holiday season can actually deliver.

December is when millions of Americans suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) or what's often called the "Holiday Blues." And even folks who aren't experiencing a formally diagnosed condition can go through periods of sadness, disappointment, and discouragement this time of the year. Many factors can be involved. Sometimes there are relationship issues and past events that haunt families and hinder their togetherness. Sometimes it's difficult to see ourselves, or other family members, aging and declining in health and capabilities. Sometimes it's national or world events that create fear, uncertainty, and despair. What if you live in Ukraine, fearful that there will be no light or heat this winter? What if your family member was killed in a recent mass shooting? What if your home and belongings were destroyed by flood, fire, or other natural disaster? If you're in these kinds of situations, are you dreaming of a white Christmas? No, you may just want to make it through the holidays comforted in some way and with your hope renewed to some degree.

Sometimes financial stresses, particularly the burden of excessive debt from holiday overspending, can contribute to feelings of discouragement and depression. Sometimes grief over the death of a loved one, particularly during the past year, can get magnified and intensified as the holidays unfold. And as much as anything else, unrealistic expectations of endless holiday bliss, fueled especially by the relentless flow of images of happiness, prosperity, and togetherness, can lead to emotional, psychological, and spiritual distress. The bottom line is that this gap between what we hope Christmas will be, and how it actually turns out, creates major issues for lots of people, including many of us.

There are plenty of recommendations about what to do, about how to handle this gap between Christmas dreams and Christmas realities. These include getting more light, especially sunlight. Or exercising and other forms of physical activity. Or focusing on making pleasant memories. Or performing acts of service for others. Or simply setting more realistic goals, for yourself and others. These can all help offset the effects of the Holiday Blues, and make Christmas, if not deeper and more satisfying, at least not as difficult.

But in the life of the church, we do even more. For one thing, we gather for worship. We let the themes of Advent renew and reinforce our hope. We don't just go on a snowy journey over the river and through the woods to grandma's house. We actually go out into the wilderness, into the desert, to hear a preacher named John. We know him best as John the Baptist. He stands out as sort of an odd character, particularly at this time of the year. After all, he doesn't really come across as a jolly old soul, all decked out in the colors and accessories of the season. Instead, he's one of the most undecorated people we meet in the Scriptures. He wears the typical garb of the poor. He survives on a diet of bugs with some natural sweetener added. And well-groomed he is not. In fact, if we had encountered him a few weeks ago, he would have been right at home in No-Shave November. Some of you may have heard of it. It's a program designed to raise cancer awareness by embracing our hair, which many cancer patients lose. Men can participate by growing a beard or mustache, then donating the money usually spent on shaving and grooming. If anyone would love No-Shave November, it would be John the Baptist. For him, no shave is actually a year round thing, a way of life.

And it's not just how he looks. It's what he says. It's what he preaches. It's not your typical upbeat holiday greeting. Instead of warm and gentle sermons titled "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays" or "Seasons Blessings," John says, "Repent." He says, "God's kingdom has arrived, so change your life." John even saves some of his harshest words for some of the religious leaders. When they show up to hear his preaching, he accuses them of being like a nest of snakes. "Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" (v. 7). Try putting that on the inside of a Christmas card, especially if it's addressed to good, church going folks, and see how that goes over.

Actually, John's rustic look and sharp-edged preaching come as a blessing at this time of the year. He often shows up in Advent to remind us that we live our lives in that urgent time between Christ's first coming and his second coming. In other words, the God who arrived through the Incarnation will also arrive to bring consummation, finishing the work of salvation that was launched at the manger. So our most pressing business isn't simply how to get ready for Christmas but most importantly how to get ready for Christ. Prepare, says John. Get ready by seeing where your own ways are contradicting the ways of God. Get ready by seeing where your own life isn't aligned with the will of God. Get ready by seeing the gaps between what God wants and what you want. And as you see these gaps, turn away from an old way of life to a kingdom kind of life.

Remember that John is a messenger sent from God, and in particular a prophet. When we think about prophets and prophecy, we often think about people who foretell the future, who predict events and outcomes based on their interpretation of various Bible passages. We associate prophecy with ministries that focus on a particular scenario of events leading up to the coming of Christ, the end of time, and the establishment of God's kingdom.

But in the Scriptures, prophets are much more than forecasters of world events, though from time to time they do some of that. Prophets are sent primarily to call people,

especially God's own people, back to God. They aren't dispatched by God to offer only soothing sermons about how all is well. True, prophets often bring words of consolation, comfort, and hope, but only as part of a larger package that includes news about sin and disobedience. So prophets spend a lot of their time pointing out the gaps between God's righteousness and our unrighteousness. They open our eyes to the distance between what God intends and what we're actually doing, or not doing. Prophets are a living, breathing wake up call, exposing the unholy space between what we profess and what we practice.

Jesus himself was a prophet. Now granted, as God's Son, he was much more than just a prophet. But many who heard him, and watched him, and followed him, recognized that he was sent from God to do prophetic things. In fact, in the very next chapter of Matthew, when Jesus begins his public ministry, he preaches the same message that John preached: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (4:17). Then, as the story unfolds, Jesus' presence, his message, his ministry, regularly come up against people, practices, and institutions that don't want to hear about or conform to the new reality of God's kingdom that has arrived through him. That's because receiving the good news that Jesus preached and practiced also meant receiving the bad news that was built into it, namely, that we need to turn away from the values and ways of the world that is passing away, and turn toward the God whose new world has dawned with the coming of Jesus.

That kind of turning, that closing of the gap between God's will and our ways, always requires painful, costly change in our lives. It requires an honest look at reality, the reality about God and the reality about ourselves. But as I showed earlier in this sermon, this is a hard time of the year to be in touch with reality. We're often so swept up in unrealistic expectations about Christmas that we end up disappointed by the way it all actually turns out. If that's the way it is for us, imagine how it must be for God when he, in his mind, has a picture of how he intends his world, his creation, to be, and how it actually is because of our failure to follow his will and do his word. Put simply, there's this huge gap between God's expectations, what he envisions for our lives, and the actual state of our lives.

In and of ourselves, it's impossible for us to bring life here on earth up to the standards and expectations of heaven. So what can be done? What needs to happen in order to close this gap between the way things are and the way God intends them to be? According to our Scripture passage, it takes more than just a new resolve to get it right this Christmas. It takes more than just ten tips for coping with holiday stress. It takes more than just adding a few more lights to brighten the atmosphere. It takes more than just being optimistic. It takes more than just making wishes that may never come true.

No, what it takes is Emmanuel. It takes God with us. It takes God himself coming to us to save us from our sins. It takes the kinds of things that John the Baptist points to. It takes divine power. It takes the Holy Spirit. It takes heavenly fire. It takes the reign of God invading our world and our lives where we're often so settled and satisfied with the present state of our spirituality. It takes a preacher like John, undecorated, unadorned, and unshaven, saying this is how things are, this is what's happening, and this is what you need to do.

Through the coming of Jesus, God has closed the gap. The gap between his righteousness and our unrighteousness. The gap between his will and our ways. God has closed that gap so that we can be in right relationship with him and with one another, so that we can have communion with him and with one another. In this season of high expectations, let's remember most of all what God's expectations are of us, how Christ has met those expectations for us, and how we need to be walking faithfully as his disciples, bearing the fruit of repentance and righteousness in our lives.