

**MATTHEW 2:23 to 3:10  
COMFORT AT ADVENT**

*And he [Joseph] came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.*

*In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand! For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight. Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.*

*Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father. For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

When you were three years old, how did it feel to be comforted by mother? In the event that you had just bumped your elbow, or shin, or head, or had your feelings hurt, it was very soothing and calming to your heart and soul that mother loved you and would help you feel better. What if it were a case where nothing was wrong, but Mom cuddled and comforted you anyway? Likely you tolerated it for a while, but then squirmed away. There were better things to do. Comfort-Needed or No-Comfort-Needed; Advent and Christmas can be viewed that way too.

The text tells us that after Joseph returned from Egypt with Mary and little Jesus (they had fled to Egypt to escape Herod's slaughter of the baby boys at Bethlehem), Joseph made their home in Nazareth. He, as well as Mary, had lived there before. Matthew tells us that this fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy saying that the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One, would be called a "Nazarene." Jesus was later referred to as "Jesus of Nazareth." Yet we cannot find one Old Testament prophecy that says He would live in Nazareth.

However, the word "Nazareth" is very much like two Old Testament (Hebrew) words that do describe Jesus. One is "nazar," to separate someone or something usually for God, such as a "nazirite" like Samson—no haircut, no wine, only service to God. Nazareth was definitely a town set apart and obscure. It is never mentioned in the Old Testament, or by the Jewish historian Josephus. Plus Nazareth was a village set in a small "bowl." It could not readily be seen. It was not a great commerce center—just a town. Perhaps that is why Nathanael, when he was first told about "Jesus of Nazareth" as the Messiah, said, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

There is another Hebrew word that is also similar to the name "Nazareth." It also fits Jesus. The word is "natzar." A natzar was a new tender shoot of growth on a plant. Isaiah talked about a natzar coming up from the root and stump of Jesse. Jesse was King David's father. David's kingdom, many years after David, would fall like a tree chopped down to the ground, because the people had forsaken the Lord. Game over. However, God in His mercy promised that a shoot, a "natzar," would come up from that root and stump and grow into a great kingdom again. That shoot from the family of Jesse and David is Jesus! His kingdom is not an earthly kingdom, but a spiritual kingdom, in which sinners are judged acceptable to God, Not Guilty, by virtue of the blood of Jesus who took the punishment for them. Jesus came as an insignificant little shoot from David's royal family. He came to be the Savior of the world. Insignificant and only a tender shoot in the eyes of the world—truly a Nazarene!

With this background, our text tells us the preparatory events leading up to Jesus of Nazareth's ministry and mission to rescue sin-sick and sin-weary souls. John the Baptist was God's man to prepare the way before Jesus. John's mother Elizabeth and Jesus' mother Mary were related. John was six months older than Jesus. He would begin his ministry and calling very likely six months prior to Jesus (Jesus began His ministry at age 30—the age of adulthood at that time). Six months sounds short, but consider that Jesus' ministry itself only lasted three years.

John preached in the wilderness of Judea. Like the prophets of old, he was noticeably different. He wore a robe of camel's hair, not very attractive, or sleek, or comfortable. For a belt, he did not have a braided cord or rope, but a strap of leather. His diet was not luxurious—locusts and wild honey—food for the poor. He did not labor in

Jerusalem, but in the wilderness at the Jordan River. John's life represented Discomfort. It was an accurate picture of a sinner's status before the Lord. The words of His message were also Discomfort! He proclaimed/preached. *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!* "You are standing at the door of God's kingdom. The Lord Himself is at hand. Do you want to be in it or outside? What do you think your record shows? It shows Failure! But He is coming in love and mercy to rescue—Repent!" The word "repent" means to "think it over again," "to have a change of mind," to see the need for forgiveness. Such rethinking is never comfortable! Re-assessing life—last year, last week, yesterday—and coming up short, unacceptable before God, gives no comfort.

That's John the Baptist's message (its first part) to you this Advent as well. Realize what an uncomfortable spot it is, in which you stand. If you would actually meet Jesus in person on the 25<sup>th</sup>, in His holiness and in His justice, how comfortable would you be? Not very. Repent! Plead His forgiveness!

But there's more to John's message. "Repent and be baptized!" The text says, they *were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins*. Baptism brings each one personally the cleansing of God, forgiveness, the assurance that the guilt of sin is gone. Therefore, relief and Comfort are yours before the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One of God, with joy." John's message was a message of COMFORT to those in DISCOMFORT. John urged the recipients of that Comfort, *Prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight*. "Prepare the way in your heart and in your life to welcome your rescuing King, your Savior from your own sin. Live for Him.

In Advent, Jesus, whose birth you prepare to celebrate, is your eternal Savior. Without Him your Discomfort only gets worse. With Him you have Comfort and peace. Whether it's the annual celebration of His arrival on earth at Bethlehem, or actually standing before Him in person(!), there is Comfort for Discomforted sinners. Make straight paths, clean up your act so as not to despise Him. Toss out the longing "I love the sins I do. I enjoy my shortcomings and sinful habits. I won't change." Treasure the washing away of sin in baptism, which you have in Jesus' name. He is your Savior; you need him badly. Receive Him with honor. Make His paths straight in Advent. A heartfelt change is part of the re-thinking and repenting. It naturally follows His Comfort.

There were others who came out to him at the Jordan, many from Jerusalem even the top-notch Pharisees and Sadducees. They were not feeling Discomforted. They felt they were safe before God. John was very blunt with them, *Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?* "You bunch of snakes, you sneaky serpents, why are you here? Who sent you out here? Whom are you trying to kid?" Should he talk that way? Offensive, wasn't it? Yes, for their own good! He wanted to make Comfortable people feel Uncomfortable, seeing their sin and their dire straits. He knew they had come just to "cover the bases," to be part of the latest thing. Had they come in repentance for their sins, seeking God's mercy and forgiveness in His Promised One? No. How did John know? He looked at the way they lived. There was no change of self-righteous actions or proud minds, before God. Nothing had changed. No fruit. *Bear fruits worthy of repentance*, John said. "There needs to be a change of heart, a presence of fruit in devotion to the Lord's for His forgiveness"

The Pharisees and Sadducees were like the child who sits on mother's lap just to keep in her good graces, to keep her happy, who thinks he has a pretty good record and needs no Comfort. Such a one is not responding to mother's love, but looking for mother to respond to their love! Self-righteousness! Backwards! especially before God! John said to them, *Do not think to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father. For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.* "Your family ties to Abraham are not going to do you any good. God looks for fruit from the heart--such fruit grows as a natural product of faith in the Savior. If none, beware! The chopping time is at hand!"

At Advent *Prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight*. Is there fruit growing from your life of repentance and forgiveness in Christ? Or---are you planning to have a happy Christmas just by going through the motions, doing the right things, saying the right words, being at the right places? Do you think Christmas will be good because you are a member at St. Luke's? Not helpful. If you are Comfortable with your own deeds and life; if your sin causes you no Discomfort; you, then, don't think you need a Savior. It's not going to be a very good real Christmas for you. Are you Uncomfortable with yourself and the sin that besets you? Do you long for the Comfort of forgiveness and salvation from Jesus, the insignificant Nazarene, the tender shoot of David's kingdom? In Him salvation is yours! During Advent: Repent. Ponder your baptism and cleansing in Jesus' name. Make His paths straight. Prepare for a real Christmas!

So be it! Amen!

Pastor Kanzenbach---