

Today I want to share with you the A-B-C's of Christmas Prep. More Christmas Prep! You may be thinking: "What a waste of time to come to this service! I already have so many things on my Christmas list that I sure don't want to add anything to it!" I agree with the list already being long!

But the Bible has something to say about this season. After all, this is a spiritual season. We need to have the spiritual prep happening. So, the Spiritual A-B-C's of Christmas Prep, based on the Ministry of John the Baptist...

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*"When the crowds came..."* [Luke 3:7] We prepare in the midst of crowds and lines and waiting for Christmas Eve.

My son Sam and I have a routine on the morning after Thanksgiving Day. We have been doing this same thing for many years now. We go the Mall of America. We take the escalator to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor on the south side of the building: and we enter into – the Disney Store.

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The Disney Store: It is the place of Mickey and Donald and all of the friends I grew up with. It is the place of kingdoms and fairy tales, where princesses arise and princes change from frogs to handsome young men. It is the place where dogs and cats always find their way home, and the good always triumph. It is the place where no matter how the story begins; the heroes always live happily ever after: The Disney Store.

Sam and I go and look for one particular item that is part of an ongoing collection. Can't tell you what it is, because Sam buys it for Jan. It is a surprise.

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After Sam takes the item to be purchased off the shelf, he leaves the store. He has other places to go: Sam Goody's – the iPod Store.

I have to stay and ... get in line. I hate lines. Every year the line at the Disney Store gets longer and longer. I think it is the longest in the Mall of America. Thanks, Sam, for the reminder that this season before Christmas Eve is the season of waiting.

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As I stood in that line this year for about 15 minutes I thought about another line. It was a line that formed 2,000 years ago. It formed in the wilderness, beside the Jordan River. Men and women and children were in that line. It was a crowd.

We are in that line this morning; this day when we are remembering the Ministry of John the Baptist. We are craning our necks to see what is happening in front of us.

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While we wait for Christmas Eve – with the crowds and the lists and wondering what is coming next – may I encourage us to...

- **Acknowledge God.**

The crowds went out to John the Baptist because he was quite a character. But they also went out to acknowledge that God was about to do something. God was in that time and place.

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God is in this time and place as well. Do you believe God is here for you?

- That thing that is on your heart today? God is here for you.
  - That concern that you have been carrying with you about a family member or a friend? God is here for you.
  - That worry that you cannot set down and you cannot share with anyone? God is here for you.
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We have this tendency to slip away from our relationship with God. We get busy and frantic and hectic and preoccupied and occupied. Our relationship with God, like all of those good habits in our life, tends to be pushed aside in these times. I know: I do that.

It is times like these that I eat too much, sleep too little, rest too infrequently, and skip worshipping my God.

This season before Christmas Eve I invite us to acknowledge God for these reasons:

- Because the Bible says: “*You know everything I do.*” [Psalm 139:3]

We acknowledge the One who already intimately knows all about us. You know, turning to God is like turning to that best friend who already knows all of your deep and dark and terrible secrets – and still accepts you!

But unlike the best friend who just knows all about you, God is the One who created you. So we acknowledge Him as our creator.

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I also invite you to acknowledge God this pre-Christmas season for this reason:

- Because the Bible says: *“I walk in the Lord’s presence as I live here on earth!”*  
[Psalm 116:9]

Whether we acknowledge it or not – we are not God! We did not create all of this and we do not sustain all of this. Someone else has a hand in this world. And the Bible says that this powerful One walks beside us.

Ever gotten on an elevator and there is one other person already on the elevator? You have a choice at that point. You can stand here and they can stand there and you can ignore each other. I am always uncomfortable doing that.

The other choice is to acknowledge the presence of the other with some witty and timely comment like, “Wow, cold out there today.” It is always more comfortable to recognize the presence of the other. So this Advent take time to recognize God’s daily presence.

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I also invite you to acknowledge God this pre-Christmas season for this reason:

- Because the Bible says: *“This vision is for a future time.”* [Habakkuk 2:3]

Not everything that is going to happen to us is going to happen in this world. In fact, very little of our overall life will happen in this world.

Just as surely as we look forward to Christmas Eve and – usually – are not disappointed, so we also can look forward to a future time when all tears will be wiped away, all pains erased, and every morning we are greeted by joy.

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The “A” of our Christmas Prep is then to Acknowledge God as we go through the crowds and lines of Christmas. The next action item for Christmas Prep:

- **Confess the Broken things in our lives.**

The Bible says that John preached this message: *“people should be baptized to show that they had turned to God to receive forgiveness for their sins.”* [Luke 3:3]

Nearly every one of us will be at a gathering on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day where a present will be unwrapped and it will be broken. Might be the crystal glass we bought for Grandma or the iPod Nano we bought for one of the kids or the doll that talks that we bought for that little one – but it does not talk. Broken things.

The greater truth is that you and I are broken and because we are broken, we break things. The Bible reminds us that we break these three things:

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- We break commandments.

The prophet Isaiah said, *“The earth suffers for the sins of its people, for they have twisted God’s instructions, violated his laws, and broken his everlasting covenant.”* [Isaiah 24:5]

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- We break promises.

Want to hear a sad Bible verse? It is this one, from Psalm 55: *“As for my companion, he betrayed his friends; he broke his promises.”* [Psalm 55:20] Read that verse out loud with me...

At various times in our lives, those words describe us. We need to confess those failures in our lives. To ignore them is like trying to sweep the dust under the rug: sooner or later the bump trips us up.

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- We break God’s heart.

Paul reminded us to be careful of God's feelings by saying: "*Do not bring sorrow to God's Holy Spirit by the way you live.*" [Ephesians 4:30]

Have you ever heard a child crying? Was it a child whose name you knew, whose life you followed, whom you cared deeply about? God hears his children crying often. God knows our names, and he follows our lives, and he cares deeply about us.

And when we cause pains to ourselves or to others by our choices, God feels deep sorrow. The worst part about breaking commandments and promises is that these things break God's heart. As we wait for Christmas, let us have a heart to heart with God about the things we have broken.

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The "A" of our Christmas Prep is to Acknowledge God; the "B" is to confess the broken things in life. The "C" for Christmas Prep...

- **Connect to God's Gift.**

"*One day when the crowds were being baptized, Jesus himself was baptized.*" [Luke 3:21] Circle the word "baptized," and then again "baptized." The first baptism refers to you and me and every other sinful person who comes to God hopeful but broken. The second baptism refers to Jesus, who came from God and joined us broken people.

What does that mean: that the unbroken Jesus joined a broken person like me?

Well, Max Lucado in one of his books tell this story. Max writes:

*I and one of my daughters were in the shop at New York's La Guardia Airport. The sign above the ceramic pieces read **Do Not Touch**. But the wanting was stronger than the warning, and my daughter touched. And it fell.*

*By the time I looked over, my ten-year-old was holding the two pieces of the New York skyline: the one had become two in the fall. Next to her was an unhappy store manager. Over them both was the written rule: **Do Not Touch**.*

*My daughter had no money. The store manager had no mercy. There was an uneasy silence between the two. Tears and strong words were about to flow.*

*So I did what Dads do. I stepped in. "How much do we owe you?" I asked. How was it that I owed anything? Simple. She was my daughter. And since she could not pay, I did.<sup>1</sup>*

Hear these words of grace again: *"One day when the crowds were being baptized, Jesus himself was baptized."*

And what it means is this: I can say, "I am with Jesus. He heals my brokenness. He gives me no chances. No overcomes the impossible that I might live today. I am with Jesus. He pays for me."

I want to tell you a story about eating and paying. My good friend Jack McMullen and I go out to lunch together about 5 or 6 times a year. We have great conversation and fellowship – and then the bill comes. Jack has paid the bill every single time.

I think Jack and I have been doing this for, at least 12 years. I figure that means I have gotten about 72 great free meals off of Jack so far, and I am looking forward to another 72!

I try to pay! I really do. But Jack always grabs the bill first. Or he is in cahoots with the waitress, and she slides it over to him. I can never pay. Jack always pays the bill.

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Come to this meal this morning. It is the Lord's Supper. Before he died Jesus wanted to share with his disciples how much he loved them. To the disciples who acknowledged him as God he came. To the disciples who brought their brokenness to him he came. To those who wanted the Gift of God he came.

Come to the meal. You do not have to pay, It is free. Snuggle up to your Savior this morning, and get ready for Christmas. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Max Lucado, Next Door Savior, page 112.