

Sunday: Second Sunday in Advent

Date: December 6, 2020

Text: Mark 1:1-8

Title: Prepare the way

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me.

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. Well that is what the song on the radio said. Beginning with Thanksgiving Afternoon, many people begin preparing for the secular celebration of Christmas. Black Friday advertisements have been playing for weeks. Some stores, fewer than last year, opened for people to go shopping when dinner was done. The Friday after Thanksgiving used to be one of the biggest shopping days of the year. Do you remember when people camped out in front of stores overnight to get the hottest toys, or the best prices on gifts for the kids. Preparation was the key to getting the best deals and the hottest gifts.

In our neighborhoods we see lights on houses, inflatable Santa's, larger than life Grinches, and sleighs filled with wrapped boxes adorning yards. Windows are frosted with snowflakes, snowmen, and Holiday wishes. Bellringers are in front of the stores we frequent. All are signs that Christmas is drawing near. Preparations for December 25th are in full swing.

The Advent Season is a season of preparation. For Christians, we prepare for the celebration of the Nativity of our Lord. However, our preparations are not centered on the merchandise everyone wants to buy this year. Our preparations are not focused on having the most elaborately decorated house on the block. Our preparations are not centered on the stores and their decorations. Our preparations are generally not visible to the naked eye.

As humans, the descendants of Adam and Eve, we inherited the corrupt nature that resulted from the fall into sin in the Garden of Eden. We are sinners. Our fallen nature leads us to place emphasis on what we see around us, what we want, and how we feel. The Advent Season is a time for preparation of our hearts.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Mark brings us to the beginning. A beginning that may seem a little odd. Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus.

Luke begins with Elizabeth, Zechariah, and the foretelling of the Birth of Jesus' cousin John. Mark, well he begins with Isaiah.

Mark's gospel starts with the prophecy of Isaiah relating to the final Old Testament prophet. The prophecy speaks not to the birth of a child in Bethlehem. It does not point to the birth of the Messiah. Instead Mark's account, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" speaks to a time about thirty years after the birth of Jesus. The prophecy points to John the Baptist as Isaiah foretold.

Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare you way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

Preparation is what John was called to do. His whole life was spent in preparation for the task set before him north of Jerusalem. It was not an easy task. Zechariah, greeted by an angel in the temple, was given instructions for John's upbringing and his future.

He must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the father to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. (Luke 1:15-17).

John lived as an ascetic. His life one of reliance on the provision of God. Mark tells us he ate locust and wild honey and was clothed in camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist. These details of John's attire seem odd in Mark's gospel don't they. Yet this seemingly throwaway tidbit draws us to an important connection with the prophecy spoken to Zechariah. In 2 Kings 1 we are introduced to a man of God who was one of the most famous prophets of Israel. When Ahaziah turned to the Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron after a life-threatening injury, this prophet was sent to condemn him for his unfaithfulness. When the messengers of Ahaziah told the king of this condemnation, Ahaziah asked for them to describe the man. Their reply, "He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist." Then the king said, "It is Elijah the Tishbite." John the Baptizer was called to go before Jesus, to prepare the way for him, in the spirit and power of Elijah. His unique attire and diet would be familiar to the children of Abraham.

They would see him as a prophet of the Most High God, and would listen to his proclamation.

John's proclamation was one of preparation. He baptized all who came to him, with a baptism of forgiveness. As washing away of sins that is a precursor to the baptism of Jesus, of which we have been blessed.

John was called to proclaim a message of repentance. His role was to point people to look into their hearts in preparation for the long-awaited Messiah. His message was one that was heard clearly by the downtrodden Israelites. They were longing for a Savior. We are told that "all of the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." The message God sent through his prophet was being heard loud and clear. It was time for preparation.

Preparation for the inhabitants of Israel, meant reflecting on their sins and repenting. God, through John, was calling people to turn away from their sins. He was leading people to turn toward God as his plan of salvation was about to be revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, God's only son.

David, in his psalm of repentance before God, Psalm 51 recognizes the need for forgiveness and what God desires from his repentant people, saying

¹⁵O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. ¹⁷The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Psalm 51:15-17).

In the Augsburg Confession the Lutheran Reformers unequivocally state that Repentance consists of two parts:

Now, strictly speaking, repentance consists of two parts. One part is contrition, that is, terrors striking the conscience through the knowledge of sin. The other part is faith, which is born of the Gospel or the Absolution and believes that for Christ's sake, as sins are forgiven. It comforts the conscience and delivers it from terror (Apology XII 3-6).

The preparation John proclaims is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This is true preparation for the coming of the Lord. In this preparation,

John is making straight the path of Christ as he begins his ministry. John cries in the wilderness are preparing the way of the Lord.

Of what importance then is this Gospel for us today? We already have the baptism of Jesus. We are forgiven of all our sins past, present, and future by the blood of Jesus shed on the cross. We don't need a baptism of repentance to prepare us for the coming of the Messiah. Shouldn't this season be one of preparation for the festivities of Christmas? You know the parties, the gift exchanges, the family traditions of Christmas Eve, opening gifts on Christmas Day, and a big dinner.

For much of the world, that is what December is all about. Preparing for the 25th by shopping, spending too much money, and socializing more than usual. By the time Christmas Day is over we are exhausted and the let down begins. Soon the drudgery of taking down the Christmas tree and putting all the decoration away will be upon us. The thrill of the presents exchanged will fade and it will be time to make New Year's resolutions that we won't keep.

With all the busy-ness of the season, we lose sight of the reason for the season. This is why we need a season of penitent reflection. Yes, our sins are forgiven. Even the sins of slighting our Savior as we scurry about focusing on American Christmas. The fact that we forget about the arrival of the Christ child in the world shows us the extent of our corrupt human nature. The evil one loves Christmas. What better time to turn people away from God? December is the month that provides ample opportunity to fall into the minutia of perfect Christmas planning and forget the point of it all. As our favorite Christmas songs play on the radio, whether they performed by a Country group, Pop artist, Rock icon, or voice from the past, we are enticed to focus on the emotion and the now of Christmas instead of the fulfillment of the promise found in the manger.

The Gospel reading is for us today. It is for all times and for all ages. It is a message to everyone that preparation for the Anointed One, never ends. John calls the people of Israel to turn away from their sins. Not a one time turning but a constant recognition of our sinful human nature and a plea before God to forgive us. Our confession before God, is not telling him anything he does not already know. Instead, it is saying to God, "You are right! I am a sinful being. Only you can cleanse me from my sin. Only you can bring forgiveness to bear on my heart."

Though American Christianity has for the most part abandoned the concept of sin and the need for obedience to the Word of God, John brings it back to our

attention with full force. Jesus has told us that the Law has not gone away. In Matthew 5, part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says,

¹⁷Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away not one iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (Matthew 5:17-18).

As we reflect on the Word of God, and upon his will for us found in his Law, we see our fallen-ness which threatens to lead us away from our salvation. In this penitential season, we are called to return to our baptism, repent of our sins, turn toward God, and as Luther puts it,

By daily contrition and repentance, the old Adam in us should be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. (SC Baptism 4).

This Advent Season, a penitential season of preparation, draws us to return to the Lord, examine our sinful hearts and lives, repent and in faith receive the forgiveness won for us by Jesus' fulfillment of the Law, his innocent death, and his glorious resurrection. As the people of old, prepared for the arrival of the Messiah, we too prepare for the second coming of the Messiah as we acknowledge our sin and receive the cleansing flood of Christ's righteousness.

Amen.