

Sermon, December 10, 2017 - Advent 2

## Prepare the Way

Mark 1:1–8



Dear friends in Christ, we begin our meditation in the name of Jesus Christ, who is, who was, and who will be forever. Amen.

This is the busy season for many, Christmas is just around the corner, and preparations are well underway. Decorations are up or will be shortly. Seasonal goodies are baked and exchanged. Christmas music is heard everywhere. By the time Christmas arrives, and as usual, many people are ready for the season to be over. Really, if you look closely, the celebration of Christmas happens in the days leading up to it. But by doing so, the focus of Christmas, the Christ Child who is born on Christmas Day, is removed. Now, who celebrates a baby's birth before it occurs? But in the Church, we long for the Child to come, and we keep on celebrating after he arrives. Jesus is the center of Christmas.

Now, if Christ is the center of Christmas what type of preparation is necessary for the arrival of the Son of God in human flesh? How should one prepare to meet the Lord? Well, in our Gospel reading tells us how, just as he did prepare the way of the Lord in his time.

And that preparation includes several insights as we shall see.

The first insight the Gospel of Mark points out is that the focus of our preparation is Christ. Not I', the person. Yes Jesus comes for one integrality, but it is his work not ours. That's what John teaches us. John the Baptist is the prophet Isaiah said will come, and do a specific work, that is to prepare the way for the Lord.

Now, notice where John did his ministry, it was in the wilderness, the desert. But why would that be? First, because his message was urgent and unmistakable.

It had been some four hundred years since a prophet had appeared in Israel, but now the Elijah God had promised, is here announcing that the long-expected Messiah is coming. Now is the time to prepare! Now is the time to get ready! However, he wanted his hearers to know that he wasn't the Saviour, he was just a prophet. He is the messenger foretold in Malachi: "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (Mal 3:1).

Second, the fact that John begins his work, his ministry, in the wilderness is of great significance. Do you know why? Because the wilderness, the desert place, harsh and barren of life, reflects the sinful degradation of God's once-perfect creation, and as such reflects the harsh, barren and sinful degradation of our sinful condition as well.

But it is in that harsh and barren condition that Jesus also begins his ministry, his saving work. Actually, beginning in the wilderness, is a theme in the Scriptures that points to God's restoring work. And that restoring work begins right there in the wilderness. It was in the desert that the Lord molded his people, Israel, into a nation once

they left Egypt. It was in the wilderness that God comforted Elijah from the fury of Ahab and Jezebel. It's in the wilderness, Jesus will begin his work of restoring creation (Mk 1:12–13). It is here that John begins his ministry, preparing the way for the King.

Now, here is something else John teaches us, is all about Christ. As John preached and baptized people sensed that John was indeed a prophet, if not the Messiah himself, but John confirms that no he wasn't the Christ but a prophet whose sole work is to prepare hearts and souls to welcome the Saviour, the Messiah, the Christ. As you see he points hearts and souls to Christ alone, the one whose sandals, even John is unworthy to untie (v 7). John saw himself below the status of the most menial slave. That slave's duty was to remove the sandals from guests and wash their feet when they entered a home. John says he is unqualified to do even that, we can say John was truly a man of deep humility.

Yet John was far more than an oddity in the desert to be ignored or a sideshow to cause derision. He was making preparation for the greater One to come. Jesus was the center and focus of this great prophet. After Jesus came and was baptized by John, the forerunner would declare: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). John's purpose was pure preparation for the One following. In other words, John teaches us that we are not the objects of Christmas celebration but Christ is. Christmas should not be about us but we make it about us, don't we. Oh, yes, the presents we want, the food we eat, the clothing we seek to buy and wear this season, oh, yes we make it about us.

Therefore the words John spoke are for us today as well, for he prepares us for Jesus by turning us from our sins to Christ.

Sin is always being turned in on oneself, isn't it. That's the temptation even John was certainly dealing with. Imagine seen those crowds with eager hear coming to him because of his strong preaching, maybe even his faithfulness to God's calling, how easy that would be to say, yes I'm the Messiah. After all, he was the one, the only one, after all those centuries, whom God had appointed the special messenger of the Messiah. Tempting isn't it?

But that is the same temptation we face even today. We know about that. Yes we are tempted to turn in on ourselves. We think we're the show, and that's our sin.

No we don't! We may say that, but think for a moment, what do we do this season, we drop a couple of coins in the Christmas kettle at the mall or any other place we see them. Now, so far so good, but slip in a bill . . . and, oh, what a good boy am I! After a little holiday cheer, folks at the office party tell you you're the boss or the employee they've always admired the most, and you believe it. People are gracious to compliment a sermon here or there, and before long... maybe, I'm the modern John the Baptist, or maybe even . . . well . . . given the most gifts this year, or the most expensive, and well what a philanthropic person I am. Not that we are to stop giving or helping, or loving the poor, the needy, no! On the contrary we are to help in season and out of season. Now, if so, what's so bad about feeling good in helping, around this time of the year? I mean we like feeling good, right? Yes but...when we make it about us, that's the problem.

Now year after year we are reminded of this problematic situation, that we take the credit that belongs to Christ. And yes, and most probably, year after year we are drawn to repentance, repentance that we make it about us, after all this is John's message, isn't it.

Repent we must, yet there is one thing that we need to understand, and that is, we cannot properly prepare ourselves to meet Jesus. It's the Lord who graciously calls and comes to us. No sinner can stand in the Lord's presence in his own strength and character. Scripture is filled with encounters with the Almighty in which the Lord graced people to come before him lest they be consumed. Moses beheld the backside of God's glory. This side of heaven no one can bear that sight. Jesus' glory shined through his flesh on the Mount of Transfiguration. Peter, James, and John were overwhelmed. When John beholds the one like the Son of Man in Revelation, he falls at the Lord's feet. It was only when Jesus touched him with his right hand on the shoulder that John could stand in the Lord's presence (Rev 1:12–19).

Poorly understood by many people is that repentance is a gift of God (Acts 5:31; Psalm 51). It's so easy to make this into our own work whereby we can come into the Lord's presence. That's why John came baptizing. Yes he boldly proclaimed a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v 4). John's Baptism is unique in its purpose. It's to prepare people to meet the coming Lord. First one must be washed (baptized) to be able to repent and be forgiven.

It's like going to a party where a dress code is required. At those parties, usually a jacket and tie are the requirements. Now what will happen if you show up to that party without a tie and jacket? You won't get in, even if you have a proper invitation. How much more should the Lord of all creation send his forerunner to prepare a people to greet him? That's what many don't get, they think that repentance is not needed, after all God loves us equally. That's true, but it is God who does the preparing so he can love us. And here is the point, how do we then get properly prepared? Through baptism! That's why we emphasize baptism, and not baptism is not an option or a choice we make, it is God's way to prepare us by washing and covering us with the robes of righteousness, Christ's robes of righteousness. Being baptized is preparation for the coming One.

People from both Judea and Jerusalem came out to John. They were baptized in the Jordan, confessing their sins (v 5). And that meant turning from those sins to the One John was proclaiming. Though they didn't know his identity yet, they were trusting that their sins were being forgiven by the Christ, the Messiah. And they were. And ours are too. Christ took them to the cross. That's what it meant to be the Christ, and turning to the Christ means trusting that Jesus' cross has washed us of all sins. Like our sins of pride, thinking it's all about us.

As he was for John, Jesus remains the focus in the Holy Christian Church. By his death and resurrection, Jesus has come and brings pleasure eternal.

Now, that we are washed and now that we wear the robes of righteousness. Helping others, truly helping those who are in need becomes a joy, a joy that goes farther than just feeling good. Now that we are baptized loving and caring for others will be easy, because it wouldn't be about us. Serving in God's church wouldn't be difficult even when we are not appreciated or even when we find adversity, why, because it is not about us. It is about Christ, it is about what Christ does in us.

Being baptized means we practicing our Christian faith. Once again, around this time, we fight for Christmas to be about Christ, and say that we must keep Christ in Christmas. That we must do, because it is about Christ, but really, what will go a long ways is that we not only keep Christ in Christmas, but live the Christian life that he called us into. In other words we not only keep Christ in Christmas, buy most importantly keep

Christ in the center of our lives, that we allow Christ to lead our lives, in service to God and of one another.

Keeping Christ in our lives means to forgive like Christ did, to love like Christ did, and to serve like Christ did.

Many preparations for Christmas are made regarding decorations, food, gifts, and holiday gatherings. What about the preparations for meeting him whom John foretold? Most of you have been baptized into Christ. You've received repentance, forgiveness of sins, and the Holy Spirit. You're clothed in the righteousness of the Lord Jesus; you're a member of his family and an heir of life everlasting. These precious gifts are true treasures unavailable anywhere else. One can't purchase, steal, or obtain them apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in your life, who continues speaking to us even today.

As these texts are heard and read, John the Baptist still speaks, as do the other prophets, apostles, and evangelists. Through them, we remember the first coming of Jesus, as foretold by John. Through them, we're made ready for the return of Jesus, when every eye will see him as he really is. O Lord, prepare us for your coming again.

Amen!