

Second Sunday of Advent – December 7, 2014
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Mark 1:1-8 (NIV)

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, 2) as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"-- 3) "a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" 4) **And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.** 5) The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 6) John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7) **And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8) I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."**

Dear Friends;

How do you prepare for Christmas? Most people would answer that question something like this: Well we've got to string the lights on the house and set up the decorations in the yard. Then we've got to get the tree set up inside and decorate it. Maybe we've got Christmas cards or greetings to prepare and send. Then there's the shopping. You've got to find just the right gift for everyone on your list. Then you've got to wrap it with paper and ribbons. And then there's more shopping. You've got to buy the food for the meal and of course you'll have to fix it and serve it. I'm sure you could add lots of other things to the list. But what does any of that really have to do with preparing for Christmas?

What if I asked the question, How do you prepare for the coming of your Savior? Would you talk about lights and decorations and trees and cards and shopping? Hopefully not! It's amazing how easy it is for us to lose sight of the proper Christmas preparations – after all isn't Christmas really celebrating the coming of our Savior?

When God wanted to prepare people for the coming of their Savior – he first announced to them that he was going to send a Savior. Down through the centuries that announcement was repeated repeatedly. That wasn't all, God did more than that. Our text explains some of the other preparations that God made when he sent his Son to be our Savior to help us understand how to

Theme: Make proper Christmas Preparations

1. Confess your sins
2. Look to your Savior in Faith

The opening words of our text really set the stage for all that follows in Mark's writing. **The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.** The Good news about the Son of God – known to us as Jesus Christ is the subject at hand. At Mark's time the name Jesus was a fairly common name (just as it is in some Hispanic countries today)...it's the NT name for Joshua. However, there's only one Son of God. There is only one who was anointed by God to be the one who helps and provides salvation as the name Joshua or Jesus means. This is the one about whom Mark is going to write about. And this is the one that we want to be prepared to worship and welcome this Christmas season and throughout our lives until he returns to bring his people to glory.

Previously the Holy Spirit had inspired the Old Testament prophets to prepare the people for the coming of the Savior by having them preach and write about him. As Mark wrote, the Holy Spirit also inspired his words. Both the Old and the New Testament tell us about our Savior. The prophet Isaiah is the OT prophet

whom the Holy Spirit used to provide the most details about our Savior. One of those details was the fact that God planned to send a special messenger who would prepare the way for the coming his Son, our Savior. Isaiah described him as **“a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”**

Just as messenger was sent ahead of a king or ruler to get the people to repair the road on which the king would travel, so John was sent ahead as a forerunner to prepare the hearts of the people for Christ's coming. **And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**

The Gospel writer Matthew summarized John's message this way: **Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.**

Our text helps us to identify two key components of repentance. One is confessing our sins. The other is placing our trust in Jesus for forgiveness. True repentance was John's message of preparation and it's a message which is timely for the season of Advent. Just as we make outward preparations in anticipation of our celebration of Christmas so we have a need to have hearts which are prepared for the coming of our Savior.

The Holy Spirit used John's preaching to bring people to confess their sins. The Holy Spirit also used John's baptism to forgive sins. Our text tells us: **The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.**

It seems that John's interesting manner of dressing coupled together with his direct and fiery message from God made a profound impression on people. Masses of people from the surrounding areas and also from the city of Jerusalem came out to the Jordan River where John was doing his preaching and baptizing. **Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.**

Confession of sins was an important part of being prepared to welcome the Lord. Perhaps it was the fact that their consciences bothered them that led the people to seek out the man who was baptizing for forgiveness. Perhaps curiosity made them come initially; then their hearts were pricked by John's preaching and they were baptized. Although Mark only summarizes John's preaching for us in this text, we know that he was not afraid to point out the sins of those who came to him. Either way God is the one who points out our sins to us. He's the one who created us with a conscience which accuses us of our own wrong doing. Whenever we feel guilty about something – that's our conscience at work.

But there are two problems with our conscience. The first problem is that the conscience isn't always reliable – it can be hardened by sin. The first time a person does something wrong, let's say it's disobeying our parents or let's say it's breaking the law by speeding ... a person feels pretty guilty, don't they. Sadly, we commit some of the same sins over and over again and the more we sin the less guilty our conscience makes us feel. Children may get to the point where it doesn't even bother them to be disrespectful or parents and adults may get to the point that it doesn't even bother them to be disrespectful to the government. It's then the conscience is hardened in regard to that particular sin. There's another reason why the conscience is unreliable – it sometimes makes us feel guilty about something that isn't wrong – for example we might feel guilty about having to speak up and tell someone about their sins. However there's nothing wrong with that, when it is done out of concern for someone's spiritual welfare.

In order to combat this; problem God has seen to it that we have his law in written form so that we can use it to determine what is and what isn't a sin. When John spoke of specific sins or when we hear of specific sins from our pastor or when we read about them in the Scriptures – we may feel guilty once again – but that's where a second problem with our conscience comes into the picture. Our conscience and the Law don't tell us what to do about sin – they make us feel guilty, maybe even desperate – we might cry out, “My sins, my sins.”

But without the Gospel there is no comfort – The Gospel about Jesus Christ provides comfort. It is because Jesus was coming as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world that John could baptize the people for the forgiveness of their sins.

The power of God's word stands behind baptism and brings the blessing of forgiveness. When the Holy Spirit has crushed us with the Law of God ... he will also make us alive with the Gospel. It is the Holy Spirit then who brings us to repentance ... leading us to confess our sins and to place our trust in Jesus for forgiveness. (1 John 1:9) **If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.**

This Advent season God prepares us for the coming of his sin by leading us to confess our sins and by pointing us to Jesus as our Savior. Our text tells us how God used John the Baptist to prepare people for the coming of Jesus. Once again Mark summarizes John's message for us. **"After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8) I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."**

Don't look to me, John says to the people...look to one who is greater than I and more powerful than I am. In regard to Jesus human birth and the beginning of his public ministry – Jesus came after John. However, John was fully aware of the fact that Jesus was greater than he. Once again, it seems Mark only summarizes John's message. Mark appears to be more interested in events than words. (Actually, that's a characteristic of his writing.) The Gospel of John (written by the Apostle John) tells us more about some of the teaching of John the Baptist. John spoke of Jesus and said: John testifies concerning him. **"This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"** Thus we see that John the Baptist also believed and taught that Jesus was the Son of God who was present from the very beginning.

In an expression of humility John confessed his own need for a Savior when he said, I'm not even worthy to stoop down and untie his shoes. That humility provides an example to us as it reminds us to look away from ourselves, our own works and actions, and to look to Jesus for forgiveness and the assurance of eternal life in his kingdom.

One of the ways in which John highlighted the greatness of Jesus is by pointing out that Jesus is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. **I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.**

Luther reminds us of the wonderful blessing of our own baptism with these words: Baptism is not just plain water, but it is water used by God's command and connected with God's Word. Baptism works forgiveness of sin, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.

But it is not the water that does these great things. Nor does the power to do these things come from the pastor who baptized us. *Saint Paul says in Titus, chapter 3, "[God] saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying."*

In his preaching John also reminded the people that Jesus was the one who ultimately was responsible for sending them the Holy Spirit who would enable them to live a life of repentance – setting aside their sins and living not for themselves but for the Lord.

In this way, we see that it was really the Lord who prepared the hearts of the people for the coming of Jesus – through the power of his word and sacrament. And so it is also the word and the sacrament which will enable us to make proper Christmas preparations.

In the midst of all of the hustle and bustle of the season – it's easy to lose sight of the real reason for the season – God's gift to us – the gift of our Savior. During this busy season Jesus has something to say to us: **"you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed."** It's so easy to forget – but the one thing we need the most is the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Dear friends; that Gospel will truly prepare you to celebrate Christmas, as well as, to welcome your Savior when he comes to take you to glory. But, what about all those other preparations? Oh, there's a place for them too. They can be an expression of our faith, our love, and our thankfulness – but once again Jesus has something to say about them: **Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.**

Look to your Savior in faith – he will be sure that you are able to have the strength and the ability to live for him not only here but more importantly in his heavenly kingdom. May God bless your preparations for Christmas by leading you to confess your sins and to look to your Savior in faith for all that you need. Amen.