

Mk 1:1-8 Prepare the Way

How are your Christmas preparations coming along? No doubt the seasonal goodies are either already baked or at least the ingredients have been purchased. The decorations are up, presents are being squirreled away in closets and trunks. The house is being prepared for the arrival of guests. Christmas music is heard everywhere you go. In fact, there is so much "Christmas" preparation going on that by the time Christmas actually gets here many people are ready for it to be over. That's because the world observes Christmas in the days leading up to it. It's as if the Christ Child doesn't matter and isn't really the reason for the season.

But the secular world isn't the only place celebrating Christmas before it actually gets here. We also do it in the Church. In fact, we celebrate Christ's coming every week, and we keep on celebrating after He arrives, because Jesus is the center of Christmas. The word *Christmas* actually means "Christ Celebration." Which means that unlike the world, our preparations for the arrival of the Son of God in the flesh are not focused on opulent spending on material goods that will soon be broken, lost, or forgotten. Instead, we are focused on prayerful contemplation of our broken and lost condition before God because of our sins. For the Christian, our preparation for celebrating Christmas is focused on our need for the promised Savior, who was born in a manger some 2000 years ago. Therefore, the weeks leading up to Christmas, are intended to prepare our hearts and minds for the arrival of Jesus, and His continued presence in our lives, which brings us to today's Gospel lesson.

St. Mark begins his Gospel about thirty years after Jesus is born. He begins by clearly stating who Jesus is; the Son of God. He expends no effort on lengthy genealogies to prove his assertion. He simply states what he knows to be true – Jesus is the Son of God. Then he connects the well-known prophesy spoken by Isaiah with John the Baptizer, the one whom God sent to prepare the way for the coming of His Son.

John is the last of the Old Testament prophets. He was born to an elderly priest named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. Because of his father's position at the temple, it is unlikely that John lived a pauper's life growing up. But God has called him to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy concerning one who would cry out in the wilderness to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He eats locusts and wild honey. He wears a camel hair tunic and a leather belt. His dress and diet remind the people of Elijah who was to come before the Lord (Mal 4:5).

It had been some 400 years since a prophet had appeared in Israel. In addition to his desert diet and clothing, John's message was urgent and unmistakable. The long-expected Messiah was coming. Now is the time to prepare! Now is the time to get ready!

But we must not mistake John for the Savior of the world. As you heard in our text, as bold as he is, John is a humble man who recognizes that he is just the messenger of God foretold by Malachi: "Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way for Me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple" (Mal 3:1).

The wilderness is a fitting location for John to begin his work, because it points to what the Lord has done in the past. It was in the desert that the Lord molded His people into a nation after He saved them from bitter bondage in Egypt. It was in the wilderness that God comforted Elijah as He hid from Ahab and Jezebel. And it is in the desert where nearly everything out there poses a threat to human life, that Jesus will begin His work of restoring creation (Mk 1:12-13).

The desert is an inhospitable and dangerous place for those unfamiliar with it. Such a harsh environment stands in stark contrast to the lushness of the Garden of Eden. The barrenness and harshness of life in the desert reflect the results of sin on God's once-perfect creation. And it is here that John begins his ministry.

John is a one-man advance team for the arrival of the One who is coming. People sensed that John was indeed a prophet, if not the Messiah himself. But John denies being the Messiah while affirming that he is the prophet crying out in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord. His work is purely preparatory. Therefore, he deflects any attention away from himself and points the people to Jesus, who is the Messiah. He goes so far as to state that he is unworthy even to untie the sandals of the One who is coming. John considers himself to be below the status of the most menial slave, whose duty it was to remove the sandals of guests and wash their feet when they entered the home.

As humble and strange looking as he was, John was God's chosen messenger preparing the way for the coming of the Lord. He was making preparations for the greater One to come. And after Jesus came and was baptized by John, John would tell his disciples "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). John's purpose was to prepare the way for the Savior by calling God's people to repent of their sins and pointing them, not to himself, but to Jesus.

And that is what he is doing for us today. John prepares us for the coming of Christ by turning us away from ourselves and our sinfulness, and directs us to Jesus. But sin always has a way of turning us in on ourselves, doesn't it?

How often the sin of pride takes hold of us as we pat ourselves on the back for our generosity or kindness to others. That little swagger in our step when we are certain that that big project at work would have failed if we hadn't stepped in to save the day, belies our sinful desire for special recognition, when in truth we were just doing our job. And who can deny those fits of anger when things don't go our way, because life is all about you, isn't it?

I could go on and on with one example after another of our sins against God and one another, but you don't really need me to do that. You know better than anyone else your need to repent of your sins, including the sin of thinking that you have already done a pretty good job of repenting of your sins and preparing yourself for the coming of Christ. But the truth is, no one can properly prepare themselves to meet Jesus. Rather, it is the Lord who graciously comes to us, even though we are steeped in the wet camel-hair stench of our trespasses and sins. Still He comes to grant us repentance and forgiveness.

What many people don't understand is that repentance is not something we do, but rather something God does in us. It is He who works repentance in us by showing us our sins and our need for a Savior from God's wrath and punishment. Without His gracious working in our hearts we would never see anything we do as sinful.

Therefore, He sends forth faithful preachers who prepare the way for His coming by preaching His message of repentance and forgiveness. As He sent forth John the Baptist, God sends forth His messengers today to proclaim a baptism of “repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (v4). For in this Sacramental Washing, the Lord calls us to repentance, and grants us the forgiveness of our sins as He comes to dwell in us.

In the waters of Holy Baptism, our gracious Lord prepares us to meet Him when He comes. He clothes us with the garment that God the Father requires of all who will enter into wedding feast He has prepared for His Son. He covers us with the pure white robe of Christ’s righteousness as He washes us clean of our sins. As John the Baptist makes clear, being baptized is not just an act of outward piety that we perform. Rather it is God preparing us for the One who comes to us.

In our text the people came from Judea and Jerusalem, and all the surrounding region, confession their sins and received the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of their sins (V5). They took this very seriously, and so should we.

Even though they did not yet know who the coming One was, they trusted that their sins were being forgiven by the Messiah. And so they were. And so are ours. For through the waters of Holy Baptism God prepares us, through repentance and the forgiveness of our sins for our Savior to come to us.

To be clear, repentance is not something that we do ourselves, but something that God does to us and in us. You see, *repentance* literally means to have one’s mind changed. Sinners that we are, we would never change our minds about sin or our need for a Savior. We would happily continue in our inward-looking sinful ways, until we walked blinding into the gates of hell. But through the preaching of the Law and the Gospel, our gracious heavenly Father repents us, changes our hearts and minds, directs us away from our sinful selves and points us is to Jesus, who took all our sins upon Himself in His in own baptism and carried them to the cross in order to save us. Thus, we see that Baptism has always been about the forgiveness of sins.

And we know this is true because God always says what He means and means what He says. And He has said over and over again that in Baptism, that wonderful washing of renewal by the Holy Spirit, He grants remission for our sins, life and salvation as He unites us with His Son, Jesus Christ. Which means that it is not us, but God who is working in baptism to prepare us for the coming One whose sandals we are unworthy to untie.

Just as Jesus was the focus of the baptism proclaimed and performed by John the Baptist, so He remains the focus of Christian Baptism today. And the good news is that all who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have received God’s gifts of repentance, the forgiveness of sins, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. You have been clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ and are members of His family and an heir of eternal life. These are all precious gifts from God that He freely grants and bestows to prepare your heart and mind to receive the One who has come and still comes to save you.

To God be the glory!

Amen