

The Second Sunday in Advent
December 6, 2020

The Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-11
 Psalm 72:1-7
 2 Peter 3:8-14
 Mark 1:1-8

The Hymns: # 344 (1,2,4,5) *On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry*
 # 343 (1-3) *Prepare the Royal Highway*
 # 338 (1-2) *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus*

The Collect: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. **Amen.**

The Sermon:
 "Preparing the Way"
 Mark 1:1-8
 2 Advent B

"John appeared in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins".

Dear Friends in Christ,

I. John in the Wilderness

It was the calling and privilege of John the Baptist to prepare the way of the Lord. As the last of the Old Testament prophets before the coming Savior, he was to preach so that the people were ready for Jesus. So there he stood, in the stripped-down surroundings of the wilderness, dressed like Elijah and proclaiming the Word.

And what did John preach in order to prepare the way of the Lord? You have his teaching summed up for you in verse four of the Gospel lesson: his message was one of "repentance for the remission of sins."

Repentance: John sought to turn the people from any sort of idol that they would trust in more than Jesus. Remission, forgiveness: John proclaimed that the One was coming who would forgive their sins and baptize them with the Holy Spirit for salvation. John was preaching repentance and forgiveness.

In other words, John was preaching Law and Gospel. You'll note that the Gospel of Mark is the shortest of the Gospels, giving you the straight story without a lot of explanatory notes. We know from this Gospel reading that John's doctrine was Law and Gospel.

We learn from the other Gospels how he applied the message to individuals. In Luke 3, the people heard him preach of God's judgment for sinners and said, "What shall we do then?" He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise" (Lk. 3:10-11). In other words, he said, "I'll show you your sin, what keeps you from God. You do not love your neighbor as you should. You rely on your possessions for security, not the Lord. Repent: confess that you've made things into an idol, because your trust in them keeps you from trusting the Lord."

Tax collectors came to hear John, made wealthy by their extra collections, their legal robbery of their fellow citizens. "Teacher, what shall we do?" they asked, and John declared, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you" (Lk. 3:13). In other words, "Your sin is that you've made an idol out of money, and you serve it by acts of greed and extortion. Your coins cannot raise you from the dead; but as long as you trust in them, you're not trusting in the One who can raise you from the dead. Repent!"

Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages" (Lk. 3:14). In other words, "Your sin is that you rely on your strength and your sword to get your way. And because you have that power, you see no need for God's mercy. Repent! As long as you trust in your strength, you won't let the Savior be your Savior."

In Matthew chapter 3, John said to the Pharisees, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance..." (Mt. 3:7-8). In other words, "You believe that God is pleased by your works and many little rules. As long as you trust in yourself, you will not trust in the Savior. Repent!"

Do you see how the message of repentance went? Sin desires to make you reject Jesus. It says, "You don't need a Savior. Cling to me, because I'll fill the need." Imagine lead weights in the pockets of a drowning man saying, "Keep us. We'll save you." Imagine an overloaded plane headed for the side of a mountain, with the cargo singing out, "You can't live without us!" That's what sin says to you.

It wants you to cling to it so that you don't cling to your Savior. It's a lie. To hold on to sin is to say, "I don't want Jesus to save me." Say that, and you'll drown, crash, die.

Repentance, on the other hand, seeks to strip you of everything that would come between you and your Savior. It empties drowning pockets of lead weights and throws the burdensome cargo out the door. It prepares for the Savior who forgives you for all of your sins, heals you of all your diseases, and gives you eternal life. It moves the sinner to say, "I cannot save myself, and I reject the idols I've trusted in."

So John preached repentance. To each individual, he pointed out their sin, those things that they clung to in order to keep Jesus from being their Savior. And once he preached that Law, he preached the Gospel.

You know one of those proclamations well: having prepared the way of the Lord with the Law, John would soon point into the crowd and declared, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

2. Preparing the Way of the Lord

It is still the calling and privilege of the Church to prepare the way of the Lord today. Some have joked that, when John the Baptist preached Law and Gospel, he was being a good Lutheran. That's turned around: may we Lutherans be good Christians by echoing the message of John, along with all the rest of the prophets and apostles.

John simply preached the same Law and Gospel, the same repentance and forgiveness, that Isaiah declared in our Old Testament lesson: Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, And His arm rules for Him; Behold, His reward is with Him, And His recompense before Him (Is. 40:10). And Peter in our epistle: The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

That is how the way is prepared for Jesus among you: by this proclamation of Law and Gospel, repentance and forgiveness. That's the doctrine. Any pastor will tell you that the application to each individual is the tricky part. But let's take a few individual stabs at it, anyway.

Is the temptation knowledge? Are you proud of your intellect, believing that your knowledge of doctrine makes you more of a Christian than others? Then repent, for you are saying, "I need Jesus less than others, because I'm smarter than they are." Confess the sin which seeks to push Jesus away, for He is the One who is perfect in knowledge (Job. 37:16).

Is it immorality? Are there illicit pleasures of thought or deed that you don't want to give up? Do you say, "Since I believe in Jesus, He'll go ahead and overlook my pet sins and immoralities?" Repent, for you are saying, "I am such a good Christian that the Holy Son of God will excuse my unholiness." Such thinking doesn't want forgiveness. It wants a Savior who compromises and only saves you from some sins, but not from others.

Is it materialism? Are you one who looks at the things that you have and says, "My life with God is okay, because I'm taken care of"? Then you are measuring God's love by things that rust, not the holy, precious blood of His Son who died for you. If you are trusting in your possessions as proof of God's love, you are not trusting in His promises. Repent.

Is it apathy? As in, "I'm just not **that** sinful, so I don't need to worry about forgiveness that much"? In that case, you're saying, "I don't need Jesus to die for all that many sins. The cross was overkill. I'm better than that." Repent.

Do you see? Every sin seeks to make you say, "I don't need Jesus to be my Savior from that one. I don't want Jesus to be my Savior." To fail to repent is to cling to the sin. To cling to the sin is to shun the Savior and His grace. Repent.

Repent, because by repentance the Lord is preparing His way to come to you with grace. He has already gone the way of the cross to redeem you from your sin. Now He comes to you by His Word

and Supper to renew your Baptism, to give you the forgiveness of sins. And where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

Repent, for the Savior is near. In fact, as your hearts are prepared by His Law for repentance, I now point you to His Gospel and His Supper and declare, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!"

John pointed to the one who has come, the Lamb of sacrifice to take away your sins. He did that by actively keeping His Father's Law, without sin. He became the spotless Lamb without blemish so that His sacrifice on the cross would be the sufficient price to pay for the sins of the world. And today He comes again to you to bless you with that same forgiveness for which He died. He comes to you in the proclamation of His Word, and with His body and blood in the Holy Supper.

And because He comes to you, you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.