

December 6, 2020 – Advent 2

Mark 1:1-8

**1** *The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

<sup>2</sup> *It is written in Isaiah the prophet:*

*“I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way”—*

<sup>3</sup> *“a voice of one calling in the desert,*

*‘Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.’”*

<sup>4</sup> *And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* <sup>5</sup> *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.* <sup>6</sup> *John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.* <sup>7</sup> *And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.* <sup>8</sup> *I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

This is a strange Christmas. Family gatherings will be smaller or not take place at all. Shopping is often done online, stores are less crowded, but people wait in line to enter. Church attendance is greatly reduced. We wear masks and we sing less. Perhaps we feel less joyful. Perhaps Christmas has receded into the background.

Brothers and sisters in Christ. Christmas is coming! Let’s **prepare for Christmas, even during a pandemic!**

The message never changes (1-4)

While our circumstances are different this year, the Christmas message never changes. When Mark wrote his account of the life of Jesus Christ, he did not talk about Jesus’ birth. He begins with the man who prepared the way for Jesus; he goes to John the Baptist at the Jordan River.

The opening words in Mark tell us that the message about Jesus Christ goes back to the beginning of time. Mark opens with *“the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God”* (v 1). Mark shows us how Jesus Christ is the gospel; he is good news. Christians call the first four books of the New Testament *gospels*, because Jesus is the center of those accounts. His miracles and resurrection prove he is the eternal *“Son of God.”*

The entire Bible is good news about Jesus Christ. The apostles write letters to help Christians understand what Jesus means for our lives. In Revelation Jesus comforts us who suffer adversity and even persecution, while we wait for him to take us to heaven. The Old Testament promised that the Savior, the Christ, would come to rescue people from their sins.

In the Old Testament, God gave Isaiah a vision of the destruction of Jerusalem, the captivity in Babylon, and the return of a small portion of the captives to Jerusalem. God would send his messenger ahead of them to prepare their way. They would return so that the Christ would descend from Abraham and David, as promised. God would also send another man to prepare the way for the Savior himself. Centuries later in the last book of the Old Testament, God spoke specifically about that person. He said, *“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come”* (Malachi 3:1).

*“And so,”* Mark tells us, *“John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”* (v 4). The ministry of John the Baptist at the Jordan River not only fulfills a promise God made centuries before. His ministry together with Old Testament prophecy testifies that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Christ. The story about how Jesus Christ conquered sin, Satan and eternal death is a timeless and unchanging message.

It is that message which gives meaning and purpose to Christmas, regardless how we might celebrate it during a pandemic. Therefore, our message to the world this Christmas is about the birth of our Savior. As a Christian church we do not take a position on the political issues before our country this troublesome year. We do not argue as a Christian congregation about whether we should wear masks, endure curfews, or take the vaccine.

We also know from Scripture that those who believed the good news about the Christ have lived under a many different and often difficult circumstances. The patriarchs like Abraham did not own land, much less have a country. Then God’s people did live in a country, in Egypt as slaves under tyrannical Pharaohs. Later God led his people directly as he fed and guided them until they reached the promised land. For centuries God’s people lurched from one calamity to another with no consistent unified leadership in their homeland. Then they lived under kings, some pious and powerful

but others evil and weak. They lived as captives in Babylon far from home. They were scattered across many lands, governed by Greek, Syrian and Roman tyrants. They lived under corrupt church leaders, during religious wars, and under fascist and communist dictators. Through the centuries they remembered their Savior; they looked forward to his coming and then celebrated his birth. The good news remained the same; it is the center of our Christmas celebration. It remains so because the need for Jesus Christ never changes.

#### The need never changes (5-7)

When John the Baptist began preaching in the wilderness down where the Jordan River emptied into the Dead Sea, the city of Jerusalem and the surrounding area, called Judea, were deeply troubled. The religious leaders worked out unholy arrangements with Roman rulers and King Herod. The priests were known to profit from the people. The common people felt abused.

Picture a small city dominated by a temple and small houses crowded within the city walls, houses with flat roofs where people cooked meals, washed clothes, and slept during hot summer evenings. Picture them observing the abuses and corruption in their city. Picture this people hearing about a prophet in the wilderness, preaching boldly like Elijah centuries before and dressed like a prophet from the past. Picture them spreading the news from housetop to housetop and you understand why the *“whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him”* (v 5).

John did boldly call out the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and the sins of the soldiers, as we learn in other gospel accounts. But the people went to the Jordan River *“confessing their sins”* (v 5). They needed a Redeemer who would shed his innocent holy blood as the sacrifice necessary for their sins. They needed to be *“redeemed from [their] empty way of life inherited from the fathers, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ”* (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Like the people in Jerusalem we also need to be purchased from our empty way of life, from our sins and the punishment we deserved. Therefore, Christmas is about forgiveness through the Christ who came to redeem us. Christmas is not about the beauty of our worship service, or our ability to gather with family and friends, or exchanging gifts. Our message at Christmas is not about changing government or starting moral renewal in our country.

Our greatest need is personal, it is the forgiveness of our personal sins. It is for release from the guilt and punishment that result from our sins. It is the same forgiveness, the same personal salvation that John the Baptist offered in baptism to prepare people for the appearance of the promised Christ. It is a promise, that never changes.

#### The promise never changes (7-8)

The central, most powerful part of John’s message was not the call to recognize sins. It was the promise that the Savior was coming and the promise that because of what Jesus Christ would do, in baptism God forgave sins and transformed lives. As John directed the people to *“the one [was] coming after [him]”* (v 7), he said that this, the very Son of God, was infinitely more powerful than he (v 7). John did even deserve to untie his sandals (v 7).

The one more powerful than John would make baptism more than an outward symbol, for he would *“baptize [the people] with the Holy Spirit”* (v 8). We should not think that John’s baptism *“with water”* only pictured sins being washed away (v 8). John’s baptism was for the *“forgiveness of sins”* (v 4), but the power of John’s baptism did not lie in the water, nor in the act of being baptized.

Neither John nor the person who received baptism produced forgiveness. That came from Jesus, from God’s promise and from the Holy Spirit who created faith in the person’s heart. Baptism connected the sinner to the perfect life and innocent sacrifice Jesus gave for their sins.

You learned this in Luther’s Catechism. *“It is certainly not the water that does such things, but God’s Word which is in and with the water and faith which trusts this Word used with the water... with this Word it is Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of rebirth by the Holy Spirit. For “[God] saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit...”* (Titus 3:5).

That Baptism with the Holy Spirit also refers to another outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Shortly before he ascended into heaven, Jesus quoted John the Baptist. He said: *“John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now”* (Acts 1:5). That happened at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit converted 3,000 people as he gave each one the forgiveness of sins in baptism. He also poured out miraculous gifts on the disciples, now called apostles, to empower them to preach the good news about Jesus Christ. They were able to speak in foreign languages and do miracles. The Holy Spirit gave them the words to say and to write in what we now call the New Testament. Thereby God spread the gospel to tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands, and eventually to multitudes around the world.

God kept his promise. He sent the Savior he promised from the beginning. He took care of our greatest need by sending him to redeem us from our sins, and he brought us to faith through his Word and the sacrament of Baptism.

Therefore, we celebrate our Savior's coming, if not in large gatherings at church and home, with big meals and gifts, then in quiet solitude remembering our Savior. As we marvel at the Son of God, made flesh, born of a young girl and laid in a manger, our thoughts turn to another birth, the rebirth we receive in baptism that made us children of God and heirs of eternal life.

Christmas is different this year, but we can still prepare for it. We can listen to and sing Christmas carols. We can read the Christmas story or tell about blessings on a video call or over the phone to loved ones in different households. We might even start a prayer chain with friends and family, remembering to include thanks for our Savior and what he does for us. In these ways we can **prepare for Christmas, even during a pandemic.** Amen.