

“Get Ready!”

Scripture reading: Mark 1:1-8

“This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. It began ² just as the prophet Isaiah had written: “Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, and he will prepare your way. ³ He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming! Clear the road for him!’” ⁴ This messenger was John the Baptist. He was in the wilderness and preached that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. ⁵ All of Judea, including all the people of Jerusalem, went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. ⁶ His clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ John announced: “Someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not even worthy to stoop down like a slave and untie the straps of his sandals. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!”

Well it is really good to be back with you this morning. The break I took was necessary but it feels good to be back. Taking this break while my mom was with us for a month was good for her and us. We laughed together and grieved together. We also did some projects together. With the threat of Covid we really had to make fun for ourselves at home, not going to the places where we normally go. And this allowed me to do something I have not been able to do in years...I was able to get Christmas preparations done. What a novel idea. I did Christmas cards for the first time in three years. To all my family and friends out there who have not heard from me in three years, this year is the year. I was able to enjoy decorating my house at my own pace rather than quickly under duress after 10PM which is what has happened most years. I even bought some new decorations this year instead of just going with what I find in the first three boxes out of the closet. I started my Christmas shopping over Thanksgiving weekend and I’m almost done shopping! I have never been this ready for Christmas ahead of time in all of my adult life.

It feels good to be prepared. But am I really prepared for Christmas? I have to ask myself that question as we read this beginning to the Gospel of Mark this morning. Because according to this passage a different kind of preparation is needed for Christmas. We have 19 days until Christmas. Are we prepared?

The opening of our passage this morning is the opening of the Gospel of Mark. And Mark begins with what serves as a title to this Gospel. “This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.” Mark’s purpose for this Gospel is to be sure that the reader knows who Jesus is. The opening verses are a claim followed by a citation. John the Baptist does not show up until verse 4. This is very different from the other Gospels isn’t it? Matthew starts with that long lineage of Jesus connecting him to the house of David and indeed all the way back to Abraham. Luke begins with all of the background information. The birth of John the Baptist and the birth of Jesus and information on his parents and the immaculate conception. And the Gospel of John begins with creation and places Jesus all the way back at the beginning of the world. But Mark? Mark starts with Jesus; the claim of who Jesus is, connects him to prophecy, and then the ministry is launched.

And although this passage is a scene of John the Baptist and people like to put a focus on John, this passage is not about John. This passage is about Jesus. The entire Gospel of Mark is about Jesus. John the Baptist is the subject twice in the entire book; here and in chapter 8. And that is it. Jesus is the main character in every other chapter of Mark. And it is interesting, Mark calls Jesus “teacher” much of the time but he doesn’t include a lot of the teachings. We get the teachings from Matthew and Luke mostly. But Mark is not concerned with the teachings. He wants you to know the teacher. The whole purpose of the Gospel of Mark is to know who Jesus is. And this is still the point. Do you know who Jesus is? This is what Mark wants you to know from the very start in verse 1. Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. And everything that follows this claim will support it. Beginning with quotes from the Old Testament that are being fulfilled. Verses 2 and 3:

“It began just as the prophet Isaiah had written:

“Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
and he will prepare your way.

He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,

‘Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming!

Clear the road for him!’”

Now Mark attributes these words to prophet Isaiah. And the voice in the wilderness and preparing the way is from the Isaiah passage we read this morning. But Mark also includes quotes from Exodus and Malachi. Exodus and Malachi are where the messenger is promised. So Mark is being very clever and clear. Although he only cites Isaiah, probably because that would have been the most important prophet to the original readers, the opening quotes are a blend of quotes from Exodus, Isaiah, and Malachi. This means God’s plan has been consistent and in motion from the beginning and that Jesus fulfills what is in the Torah, the major prophets, and the minor prophets. In other words, Jesus is not plan B after the Old Testament experiment fails. Jesus is THE one planned from the beginning. And John is the divinely appointed precursor or messenger to the Messiah.

Enter John in verse 4. Let’s read this part again: “⁴This messenger was John the Baptist. He was in the wilderness and preached that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. ⁵All of Judea, including all the people of Jerusalem, went out to see and hear John.” So, John is the messenger. Now notice where this takes place...in the wilderness. This is a familiar place for Israel. They began this journey in the wilderness. God used the wilderness to prepare them as a nation back in Exodus. Now they go back to the wilderness to prepare. I don’t think this is insignificant. In fact in just a few verses Jesus will go into the wilderness. God uses the wilderness. Sometimes we need to be away from distractions and out of our comfort zones to hear what God is trying to say. Maybe this time of Covid 19 which is out of our comfort zones and keeping us from the usual distractions of the Christmas season, maybe God can use this time in significant ways in your life. God uses the wilderness for good.

Mark begins by saying to prepare and then John is teaching and baptizing out in the wilderness. And he tells people what they need to do to prepare. Repent and be baptized to show they are turning to God for forgiveness. Prepare. The Old Testament quote said “prepare the way.” What does this preparation look like? Mark seems clear that putting up decorations and shopping and baking and mailing cards is not the kind of preparation God is looking for. All of that stuff that I am so proud of getting during my time off is not what God is looking for. So, what does this other kind of preparation look like?

This kind of preparation takes three things that I want to highlight this morning. Preparation is intentional, preparation can be hard, and preparing the way is simply making it possible for us to follow Jesus as the way. First, preparation is intentional. It doesn't just happen. Go back to all that stuff I got done at home in November...would any of it happened on its own? Does the house clean itself? Does your house clean itself? Sadly, no. We all know that preparation is intentional. Prepare is a verb. It is an action. We have to intentionally prepare. You know, one of the reasons I had to take time off was because I had stopped taking care of myself which is one of the things needed to prepare me to do my job well. Physically I wasn't doing the things to keep me healthy. I was not playing indoor tennis or swimming because of Covid. My garden is out for the winter. And I had not intentionally put other activities in my daily schedule to replace those things. I just kept working and working with the completely wrong notion that at some point I would feel refreshed anyway. It doesn't work that way. I have to be intentional about taking care of myself, which is one of the things I changed in November. So preparation needs to be intentional.

More specifically spiritual preparation needs to be intentional as well. Getting to know God is not a passive activity. It won't just happen. Has God done everything needed to save you? Yes. But you need to actively participate in the process. You can't put it off and hope that a voice from heaven will just come down and tell you what you need to know. Our spiritual preparation is one of the most important things we need to do. We have to intentionally carve out time for prayer, reading God's Word, and sharing our faith with others and letting their faith influence us. This is one of the reasons church is so important. It is part of our spiritual preparation and we get to do it together, which is what it was meant to be.

So, one, preparation needs to be intentional. Second, preparation can be hard. Think about the traditional Thanksgiving meal that many of us recently had. The stuffed turkey that takes hours to cook, the home-made stuffing, the pies, the mashed potatoes, the casseroles, the gravy. How many times a year do you make that meal? Do you make it every week? No. Why wouldn't you make it every week? Because it is hard. The prep for that meal is hard. For me it is two days in the kitchen not to mention the extra grocery shopping that has to happen before that. Preparation can be hard.

John includes this in his teaching. He tells us that we need to repent. Repent. Does that sound like fun to you? No, repenting is hard. But it has to happen. Because without repentance we cannot understand salvation. The definition of repent is typically to turn. And this is in the Old Testament all over the place. God and the prophets were constantly telling Israel to turn away from their sin, turn away from their idols, turn away from their offenses, and turn towards God. This same language is used by John in this passage. He wanted them to be baptized "to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven." So it means turning away from our sin and turning towards God. And this can be hard because the world wants us to stay in our sin. The world does not want us to turn to God. The world wants us to stick with our idols, not turn away from them. The world feeds us lots of idols and thrives on them. The world depends on our greed for its materialism, our selfishness for a lack of generosity, our anger and aggression to support a judicial system and incarceration, and our desire for comfort and avoidance of things that are difficult or depressing, that desire fuels our first world options for entertainment, alcohol, drugs, addiction to the internet and lots of other addictions as well. But God wants us to turn from these things and towards God instead. This is what repenting is.

And I said it is necessary for understanding salvation. It is only when we realize what we are being saved from, when we realize the gravity of our sin, that we understand the amazing act of being forgiven. Karl Barth used a Swiss legend as an illustration for prisoners in a prison outside Basel. He wrote “you probably all know the legend of the rider who crossed the frozen lake of Constance by night without knowing it. When he reached the opposite shore and was told whence he came, he broke down horrified. This is the human situation when the sky opens and the earth is bright, when we can hear, by grace you have been saved.” In other words, repentance allows us to realize how condemned by sin we really are and how wonderful what God has really done for us. Gary Anderson writes “the notion of human sin and fallenness is nothing other than a considered reflection on the unmerited and unfathomable moment of salvation.”

So, repentance is really necessary for our relationship with God. It is an important part of preparing for Jesus. It is a step that cannot be skipped because without it we just don't get Jesus. We don't understand grace without understanding our sin. And we need to encourage each other as a church. Richard Foster writes this: “if we know that the people of God are first a fellowship of sinners, we are freed to hear the unconditional call of God's love and to confess our needs openly before our brothers and sisters. We know we are not alone in our sin...we are sinners together...our humanity is no longer denied, but transformed.” We should not deny our humanity. Our sin. We should rather turn to God and let it be transformed. That is repentance.

The scripture says prepare and make the way straight. What does it mean to make a path straight for Jesus? Well John tells us. It means repent and be baptized. If we go back to the Isaiah passage from this morning, the prophet gives us this geographical description of the spiritual process of repentance. Starting at verse 4 of Isaiah 40: “Fill in the valleys, and level the mountains and hills. Straighten the curves, and smooth out the rough places. Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed,” Smooth out the rough places. I don't know about you but I have lots of rough places in my life that could use some smoothing out. This is part of our preparation. It can be hard, but it is most necessary.

The people that were coming to John to be baptized had to travel to the wilderness. They had to leave the comfort of Jerusalem. It was the more difficult path. It was hard. Yet these people were coming to him in droves to be baptized. They were looking for something. Why was John so popular? It might have something to do with his wardrobe. His hairy garment and leather belt sound strange to us, but for a Jew it would sound like Elijah. They recognized John as an Elijah type prophet. Maybe God was going to finally come and establish God's kingdom. This is what they had been waiting for. So to prepare they went and got baptized to be sure that they were ready. And God was coming, just not in the way they were expecting.

John the Baptist calls everyone to repent and be baptized. Everyone. This would have sounded odd or even insulting to Jews who believed that only defiled Gentiles needed to be baptized. But John is saying that everyone needs to be baptized which means everyone is defiled and in need of it. Now I don't want to get hung up on baptism too much here. A sermon on baptism would include much more than this one passage from the Bible. This is not about the topic immersion baptism, a topic that has divided many Christians for much too long in my opinion. What is important to get here is that baptism shows action by God, not so much us. We don't get baptized in order to prompt God to forgive us. It is not about our action. Baptism shows that we understand that God forgives and that we have to be willing to repent so that God can act. So when John tells people to repent and be baptized, he means that we all need to repent and then that we understand that God forgives.

So, preparation is intentional and preparation can be hard. Lastly, the process of preparing the way makes it possible to follow Jesus as the way. In just verses 2 and 3 the word “way” or “path” appears three times. This is a theme in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus is the way. Commentator Edmunds puts it this way: “from its outset the story of Jesus directs hearers not to metaphysics and mysticism, nor to ethical rules and systems, but to something practical and transforming, a WAY to salvation made possible by God.” We prepare. We prepare the way not just so we can understand our salvation, but also so we can follow Jesus who is the way.

Christmas is coming. There is a lot to do in the next 19 days. We have a lot of preparations to make. Will we choose to make the most important ones? Will we be intentional about a relationship with God? Will we be willing to see how much we need to change and turn away from the things we know are sinful in order to understand our forgiveness? Are we willing to be baptized with the Holy Spirit to the glory of God’s action in the world? Are we willing to prepare to follow Jesus? Jesus is waiting for us now. Jesus is coming again. We need to be ready. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.