

The Second Sunday In Advent (December 10, 2017)	1709
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Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"-
-"a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer!

Dear friends, who prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord,

Are we ready? That's a question that we ask on Sunday morning. Our worship services take a great deal of preparation. Someone makes sure that the altar and front of the church are ready. Someone puts everything in order on the table in back. The bulletins are made, folded and put together. The ushers need to be ready. The pastor must have the sermon and service ready. The organist needs to be ready. And all of you need to take time to get ready, to get dressed up and drive over here to church. After all this preparation, hopefully before the service starts on Sunday morning, we can breathe a sigh of relief and say, "Yes, we are ready, ready to worship our Lord." All of our preparations for church should not be done lightly, for it is a most important thing to worship our great God, the God of heaven and earth.

Today God's word asks us that same question: "Are you ready?" Not so much, "Is everything ready for the service?" or "Did you take time to get outwardly ready for church?" But "Is your heart ready? Is your heart ready to hear about your Savior?" Are You Ready? Are you ready to hear the Good News? Are you ready to be forgiven? Are you ready to celebrate Christmas?

Mark begins his Gospel rather abruptly and gets right to the point. No introduction. He simply states, "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Then he continues to relate the account of how God's Son was born here on

earth, and as true God and true man in one, lived a perfect life. In his ministry Jesus proclaimed who he was, that he is the very Son of God. He declared why he had come; namely, to win our salvation. Jesus proved who he was by his many miracles. Mark relates how this Jesus suffered, was crucified, died, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. These are all interesting facts of history, aren't they? And too many people see them as only interesting facts of history. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, lived here on our earth. That's nice! So what? Why did he come here, and what good does the fact that he came do me today?

Are you ready to hear the Good News? That's what the word "gospel" means, "good news!" And that's what Jesus' coming is--good news! But in order to be ready to hear that good news, in order for it to mean anything to us or do us any good, we need to understand why Jesus came. He came to rescue us, to save us, because we were in terrible trouble. We were miserable dying sinners, unable to stand before God, justly condemned by him for all eternity. Unless people are aware of their wretched sinful condition, they are not ready to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. What good is a Savior to people who don't understand that they're sinners? To such people, Jesus has no real purpose or meaning. People need to be ready for Jesus.

That's why God sent John the Baptist ahead of Jesus, to prepare the people to receive their Savior and the forgiveness he came to win for them. And that's why the Gospel of Mark first records the ministry of John the Baptist for us, not just to tell us an interesting story about a rugged prophet who lived and preached out in the Jordan desert, but to make us ask, "Are we ready to be forgiven?"

The ministry of John the Baptist was foretold in the Old Testament: "It is written in Isaiah the prophet." Speaking to the Savior, God the Father promises: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"-- "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

"And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." "On Jordan's bank the Baptist cried..." The Jordan is the major river in Palestine. It's the lowest river on this planet, dropping far below sea level, and emptying into the Dead Sea. With the high mountain ranges on both sides of the Jordan valley, it is obvious that this is rugged country. Add to that the fact that the Jordan Valley rarely receives rainfall, and during the summer, the temperatures usually remain over 100 degrees, even at night.

It was in this Jordan wilderness that the voice of John the Baptist was heard, a man as rugged as his surroundings; his clothes made of camel's hair; a simple leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts, which are grasshoppers, and wild honey that he found in the stony clefts. "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him." Thousands upon thousands of people went out to hear John preach, and to be baptized by him. And what was his message? Repent! The kingdom of heaven is near. The Savior is coming. Get ready for him. Repent!

That word "repent" means to change one's way of thinking, to change from unbelief to faith, to see our errors in our own ways in regard to God, and accept his forgiveness for our sins. Many of the people who came out to John to listen to him preach and to be baptized by him were not repentant, and so they were not ready for the Savior. Oh, they thought they were ready. They were good upstanding citizens. They attended worship services regularly at the synagogue on the Sabbath Day. They said

their prayers to God each day, and they did their good works. Many of these people were Pharisees, who prided themselves with leading better than average lives. But they were not ready to be forgiven because they did not recognize their own sinfulness. They failed to repent.

John was a rugged man in a rugged place, and he had a rugged job to do. His mission: "To prepare the way for the Lord, [to] make straight paths for him." When they build roads through the mountains, they use dynamite, and break up the rocks and push them out of the way. John was to prepare straight paths for Christ in the hearts of people, and he had some pretty rough terrain to work with. With God's law, John was to break up those stony hearts, crush and pulverize those hard hearts. He was to spiritually beat those people to the ground, so that they would recognize their wickedness, their own helplessness and welcome the Savior and his forgiveness. Luke tells us what John said to the Pharisees who didn't repent. He said, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."

Many of the people who came out to John did repent. They confessed their sins, and what did John do? He baptized them. Through the water and the word of baptism, John washed away their sins, with the authority given to him by God. Yes, John tore people down by condemning their sins. But he did this only so that he could then build them up in Christ, and in the forgiveness of sins Christ was coming to win, so that they would be ready for their Savior.

Are we ready to be forgiven? Are we ready to humbly confess our sinfulness and unworthiness to God and plead with him for forgiveness? If we think that we're pretty good people, at least better than some other people, then we're not ready. If we think that it's not really that serious to go against God's commands, then we're not ready. If we just ignore our sins and try to do our best, then we're not ready. We need to repent. Then we're ready to receive the forgiveness Christ won for us.

And then we're also ready to celebrate Christmas. God's Son was born, came into this world for one purpose: to save sinners. John the Baptist was ready for the coming Savior. He humbly recognized his own unworthiness and the greatness of that Lord. John proclaimed, "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Jesus came and won our salvation, taking away our sins on Calvary's cross. After he rose from the dead and was about to ascend into heaven, he promised his disciples: "For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." (Acts 1:5) We know that took place on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out. We also have received the Holy Spirit through our baptism. Through God's word, He works faith in our hearts and assures us of the full and free forgiveness Christ has won for us.

In only a few weeks we will be celebrating Christmas. Most people, at least in our country, celebrate Christmas. Unfortunately though, many do not celebrate the birth of Christ. Instead they try to make Christmas into everything except what it really is, and they celebrate for every reason except the real reason; namely, that Christ was born. Why don't they celebrate Christ's birth? Simply because they aren't ready; because they fail to repent, and so they see no need for Christ. What good is a Savior to people who don't think they need forgiveness? And what good is Christmas to people who don't think

they need a Savior?

Are you ready for Christmas? It takes a lot of preparation, doesn't it? This is the time of year to put up the Christmas tree, string up the lights, bring out the ornaments and decorations. It's time to bake the cookies and do the Christmas shopping. It's a joyful time of year. But it is not a time for a frivolous and carefree attitude, an attitude that simply says, "All is well in my life." Because by ourselves, all is not well. If it were, Jesus would not have had to be born on earth to die for you and me. May the message from the banks of Jordan find its way into our hearts this Christmas season. "Repent!" Then we're ready, ready to hear that more glorious message of angels: "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior." Lord, prepare our hearts to rejoice in that Christmas message.

Amen

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus, Amen.