

An Important Voice in the Wilderness

Mark 11-8

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way,³ the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare^[c] the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’” John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.⁵ And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.⁶ Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.⁷ And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.⁸ I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Christmas preparations are well underway. Decorations are up or will be shortly. Seasonal goodies are baked and exchanged. Christmas music is heard everywhere. By the time Christmas arrives, many people are ready for the season to be over. The world observes Christmas in the days leading up to it. It’s as if the Christ Child matters little. Who celebrates a baby’s birth *before* it occurs? In the Church, we long for the Child to come, and we keep on celebrating after he arrives. Jesus is the center of Christmas.

What type of preparation is necessary for the arrival of the Son of God in human flesh? How should one prepare to meet the Lord? Our text tells us how John prepared the way of the Lord in his day, and John’s preparation for Jesus prepares us too.

Mark begins his Gospel about thirty years after Jesus’ birth. He highlights the work of John the Baptist. He is a man foretold by Isaiah and recognized in his work. John prepares the way for the Lord. He is the last prophet of the Old Testament. His diet of locusts and wild honey along with his clothing of camel hair and a leather belt were appropriate in the wilderness. His dress and diet remind the people of Elijah, who was to come before the Lord.

It had been some four hundred 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 is coming. Now is the time to prepare! Now is the time to get ready! But don’t mistake John to be the Savior of the world. John is a man of great humility. He is the messenger foretold in Malachi: “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple” (Mal 3:1).

The wilderness is a fitting place for John to begin his work. Why? Because it points to what the Lord has done in the past, long before John came on the scene. It was in the desert that the Lord molded his people into a nation once they left Egypt. It was in the wilderness that God comforted Elijah from the fury of Ahab and Jezebel. It’s in the wilderness, where even the plants and animals pose a threat to mankind, that Jesus will begin his work of restoring creation. The desert is an inhospitable and dangerous place for those unfamiliar with it. The barrenness and harshness of life seem to reflect the sinful degradation of God’s once-perfect creation. Yet, it is here that John begins his ministry.

John is a one-man advance team for the arrival of the One to follow. People sensed that John was indeed a prophet, if not the Messiah himself. John denies being the Messiah, but affirms being a prophet. His work is preparing. John deflects attention away from himself and directs it all to Jesus. He shows remarkable humility. He declares to those who would name him as the Messiah, that he is unworthy to untie the sandals of the One who is yet to come. John saw himself below the status of the most menial slave. That slave’s duty was to remove the sandals from guests and wash their feet when they entered a home. John says he is unqualified to do even that.

Yet John was far more than an oddball in the desert to be ignored or a sideshow to laugh at. He was making preparation for the greater One to come. Jesus was the center and focus of this great prophet. After Jesus came and was baptized by John, the forerunner would declare: “He must increase, but I must decrease.” John’s purpose was pure preparation for the One following. John

prepared for Jesus by pointing away from himself to Christ.

That works for us too. John prepares us for Jesus by turning us from our sins to Christ. Sin is being turned in on oneself, isn't it. A temptation for John certainly was to see those crowds, those eager hearers, as being all about him—his dynamite preaching, maybe even his faithfulness to God's calling. He was, after all, the one, the only one, after all those centuries, whom God had appointed *the* special messenger of the Messiah. Pretty heady stuff. Pretty seductive.

We know about that. We're tempted to turn in on ourselves. We think we're the show. That's our sin. Walking out of Walmart, you don't just drop a couple of coins in the kettle; you fold and slip in a bill . . . and, oh, what a good boy am I! After a little holiday cheer, folks at the office party tell you you're the boss or the employee they've always admired the most, and you believe it. People are gracious to compliment you on your sermon, and before long you think you really are John the Baptist come back from the dead. Bottom line, John comes preaching repentance, and we're pretty sure we've done a pretty good job of that.

In fact, you cannot properly prepare yourself to meet Jesus. It's the Lord who graciously calls and comes to us. No sinner can stand in the Lord's presence in his own strength and character. Scripture is filled with encounters with the Almighty in which the Lord invited people to come before him so they would not be consumed. Moses beheld the backside of God's glory. This side of heaven no one can bear that sight. Jesus' glory shined through his flesh on the Mount of Transfiguration. Peter, James, and John were overwhelmed. When the apostle John beholds the one like the Son of Man in Revelation, he falls at the Lord's feet. It was only when Jesus touched him with his right hand on the shoulder that John could stand in the Lord's presence.

It's much misunderstood, but repentance is a gift of God. It's so easy to make this into our own work whereby we can come into the Lord's presence. John boldly proclaims a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John's Baptism is unique in its purpose. It's to prepare people to meet the coming Lord. First one must be

washed – baptized -- to be able to repent and be forgiven.

People from both Judea and Jerusalem came out to John. They were baptized in the Jordan, confessing their sins. And that meant turning from those sins to the One John was proclaiming. Though they didn't know his identity yet, they were trusting that their sins were being forgiven by the Christ, the Messiah. And they were. And ours are, too. Turning to the Christ means trusting that Jesus' cross has washed us of all sins. Like our sins of pride, thinking it's all about us.

As he was for John, Jesus remains the focus in the Holy Christian Church. By his death and resurrection, Jesus has come and brings us joy.

Many preparations for Christmas include decorations, food, gifts, and holiday gatherings. What about the preparations for meeting him whom John foretold? You have been baptized into Christ. You've received repentance, forgiveness of sins, and the Holy Spirit. You're clothed in the righteousness of the Lord Jesus; you're a member of his family and an heir of life everlasting. These precious gifts are true treasures unavailable anywhere else. One cannot purchase, steal, or obtain them apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in your life. In the Third Article of the Nicene Creed, we confess that the Holy Spirit "spoke by the prophets." He continues to do so today. As these texts are heard and read, John the Baptist still speaks, as do the other prophets, apostles, and evangelists. Through them, we remember the first coming of Jesus, as foretold by John. Through them, we're made ready for the return of Jesus, when every eye will see him as he really is. Lord, prepare us for your coming again. Amen!

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