

Sermon for Advent 2B
Sunday, December 10, 2023
“Prepare the way”

Text: Mark 1:1-8

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

For the next two Sundays, we will encounter John the Baptist in our gospel reading. If you remember anything about John the Baptist in relation to the birth of Jesus, then you know he was the forerunner, a prophet, telling people to repent because the Messiah was coming. Next week, we will hear from John’s gospel and the prophetic message will be on a cosmic scale. Today, however, we hear Mark’s version. Prophetic, yes. Cosmic? Not even. Mark’s account is short, to the point, and grass roots. John appears on the scene preaching a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins, and predicting the coming of someone greater than he whose sandals he is not worthy to tie. John’s message is simple in this gospel. It hearkens back to the prophets of old and looks to the future appearance of the anointed one, The Christ.

Can you imagine what it would be like to meet this John? Some guy dressed in camel hair who eats locusts and wild honey. I suspect if any of us ran into someone like that, we would run in the other direction, maybe walk on the other side of the street, just to avoid an encounter with this weirdo. Apparently, folks 2,000 years ago didn’t have the same hang-ups we do today. John was considered a prophet. He had a following and he had disciples. We don’t follow guys like that. We like handsome fellows dressed in nice suits—like Joel Osteen—or at least those of us dressed in fancy vestments. We fear people who look different or unkempt. We would call John a crazy person who was on something or off his medication. The folks who heard John the Baptist, however, took him and his message seriously. See, two thousand years ago things were pretty rough, if you were of Hebrew ancestry. The Jews were living under the rule of a foreign power—again!—this time, the Romans. Life couldn’t have been easy for the Hebrew-speaking people. They lived in the midst of the heavy hand of the Romans. They lived in the midst of perpetual wars, including the recent Jewish Wars. They paid outrageous taxes. The Jews who did hold power did so because they were puppets for the Roman government, and the religious leaders were corrupt. They lived in a state of repeated turmoil, upheaval, injustice, and anxiousness. They lived under a regime that threatened their religion and their desire to worship the one true and only God, Yahweh. The Jewish people were looking for somebody who would come to save them and restore the great kingdom of David, a unified Israel. The prophets of old preached that if Israel repented and returned to the Lord, God would restore their kingdom. God had saved them from the Egyptians, the Philistines, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians, so why would it be any different with the Romans? John’s message sounded legit: Repent and turn back to God, for the Messiah is coming and he will restore the kingdom of Israel. John’s message was more than simply a message of repentance. For the original hearers, it meant a new beginning; it was a message of hope.

It was a message that gave the people of Israel something to look forward to. His message was to prepare the way of the Lord.

John's call to repentance meant admitting being a sinner and promising a change. It was marked by baptism where one promised to change their life and make a turnaround toward walking in God's holy ways, following his holy laws. John's baptism was rooted in a Jewish purity ritual of immersing in water to cleanse and purify, not just the body, but the soul as well, prior to standing before God. So baptism was not new. But John knew that the holy one of God, his anointed one, in other words, the Messiah or Christ, was coming who would change the relationship between humankind and God. He would be someone so great that John felt that he wasn't worthy even to untie the thong of his sandals. When John baptized, he also called on his followers to prepare the way of the Lord. The cleansing included a commitment to prepare oneself and others to receive, believe in, and follow the Messiah when he comes.

Our Christian baptism means the same thing, and so much more. Our baptism cleanses us of the sin of the Fall of Humanity by Adam and Eve. Our baptism makes us promise to repent and make a complete turnaround toward God. And our baptism also makes us part of the family or body of the Messiah, brings us in communion with him, such that his presence becomes a part of us, of our own bodies, so that we can go forth to prepare the way of the Lord today.

So what does it look like to prepare the way of the Lord? How *do* we prepare the way of the Lord? It begins with the promises we make at baptism: to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in breaking bread, and in prayer; to persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever we do fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord; to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ; to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves; and, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

Preparing the way of the Lord means taking the responsibility to live our lives every day presenting the face of God and the light of Christ everywhere we go and everything we do. Preparing the way of the Lord means praising God for his goodness and sharing our joy. Preparing the way of the Lord means that we recognize that God is always with us, through all of the ups and downs of life, and to testify to this broken world that there is hope, even in the midst of all of the things that cause us fear, worry, anxiety, stress, grief, and sorrow. Preparing the way of the Lord means that when we *do* sin, we have somewhere to go and someone to go to who will forgive us, embrace us, and tell us to try again.

Preparing the way takes work. Preparing the way anticipates that we will not just sit in a pew on Sunday morning and do nothing. Preparing the way expects us worship with enthusiasm—sing, pray, respond, engage, and be an active participant when we come together. Preparing the way makes us act to make this world, the community, the

homes where we live, the places where we work, better. Preparing the way means making our own lives better. So, this morning, ask yourself, “Am I preparing the way of the Lord?” Now, turn to your neighbor; ask each other, “Are you preparing the way of the Lord?” Advent invites us to open our hearts and souls to make space for God to come in once again and revitalize us to make ourselves ready and worthy to prepare the way, because without God, we cannot do this; without God we cannot prepare his way.

In this season of Advent, we pray for a better world; we pray for a world where everyone respects each other and strives to maintain the dignity of every human being; we pray for a world where all of God’s creation on earth is properly cared for; and, we pray for peace. As we heard from the words of St. Peter: “Therefore, my beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish.” While we prepare the way of the Lord, while we anticipate his eventual return, let us be found at peace, without spot or blemish, living in his holy ways and living a changed life. Amen.

Resources

Feasting on the Word for Advent 2 (Year B, Volume 1)