

Second Sunday in Advent – 2023

Isaiah 40:1-11

2 Peter 3:8-14

Mark 1:1-8

God is preparing His church for Christ's return. When He calls you to act He truly wants you to act. God will inspire you to prepare. God will prod you to prepare. God will give you a cross to bear to lead you to prepare. God will fill your heart with the truth. God will convict you of your sin. God will lavish on you the sweetest forgiveness you have ever known. So many tools are at God's disposal. So many divine instruments are employed to prepare you.

John the Baptist is one of God's instruments, one of God's priceless instruments. John is wild, unruly, untamed. If ever there was a prophet who was determined to fulfill his calling, it was John the Baptizer. Do you think that John cared what people thought of Him? Oh, no! John had a job to do. Zechariah, John's priestly father, was filled with Holy Spirit and prophesied about his infant son: "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins" (Luke 1:76-77).

Prepare the way. Wake from your spiritual slumber. Lift up your head and see the coming King. Repent, for He draws near. The crooked ways of sin in your life are to be made straight. There is no alternative. There is no secondary option. John's message was not casual. John's message was not pre-tested by a focus group. There is alarm in John's voice. Judgment and reality blended to drive home a point that is corroborated by every beating heart. What is that point? You are a sinner. Sin puts you at risk. John's job was to prepare the way. John was sent by God to do exactly that; to awaken Israel from its drowsy status quo, to strike a prophetic note that leads to action. Repent!

God Himself approaches and He is righteous. He sees us all and He does not traffic in lukewarm pleasantries or half-truth excuses. John's message was for the high and the low, the physically weak and the physically strong, the grossly sinful and the discreetly sinful. John was not interested in massaging their feelings or uttering banal platitudes or urging them to live their best life now. John called for action. Repent is an action word. To *feel* remorse is one thing. To take action to purposely align your life with God's will is way more important than how you feel. Some folks think that feeling bad about the ugliness in their life is repentance. Folks who think this way tend to leave their ugliness in place. John the Baptist would not be impressed. He would liken it to putting a bandage on a corpse.

If Christianity is not the principal thing that determines what you will do and what you won't do then your faith is dead. A large part of an addict wants to keep engaging in their chosen indulgence regardless of how guilty about it they may feel. Feeling bad after a bender is not repentance. Taking steps to clean up your life, regardless of how difficult those steps may be, that is a genuine reflection of the word "repent." John the Baptist struck such alarm in his hearers that they were begging him to tell them how to show that they were truly repentant, begging him to tell them what behaviors aligned with God's will (Luke 3:10-14). What do you think of that?

Here's one of the most direct statements in all of Scripture and it comes from the mouth of John the Baptist: "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Luke 3:8). John was preparing the way. God was using John the Baptist to prepare His people for His Son. That statement, taken to heart by believers, prepares people to receive the King. Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. What does that mean? If you are prone to lying then **go out of your way** to tell the truth. If you are lecherous, if you lift up your eye to every female that crosses your path, then **treat all women** as your most prized sister; serve as a protector and not a predator. If your mouth gossips with other mouths then **go out of your way** to defend your neighbor, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way. If you are stealing from your employer by being lazy, by being negligent in your duties then **change your behavior** and put in a full and honest day's work. Those are just a few cursory examples of what it means to "bear fruit in keeping with repentance."

Such things are not empty spiritual exercises. This kind of action enlivens the mind to a pressing reality: Christ is near and we need to prepare. John said: "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie" (Mark 1:7). Mightier; the Lord Himself was coming. John was in the wilderness. Jesus came to John at the Jordan. After the Christ submitted to John's baptism He was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. Forty days He fasted. Forty days, Jesus endured that pain. And He was met by Satan. Mightier; "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). Mightier; this mighty Savior stood up to Satan's temptations. "Turn this stone into bread." "I'll give you all the kingdoms of the world if you just fall down and worship me." "Throw yourself down from here to see if God truly loves you" (Luke 4:1-13). The Mighty One vanquished our foe (Matthew 12:29; Colossians 2:15). The Mighty One is faithful. Jesus came to destroy all the temptations you face, all the temptations you and I have failed, all the craft of Satan. Mightier; He came to destroy sin, to destroy death; to crush the serpent's head. Mightier; Satan prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour but he has a chain round his neck that is fixed to a cross sunk deep into the bedrock of this creation (Revelation 20:1-3).

Mightier; the One mightier came to be crucified. You are not worthy to stoop down and untie His sandals and yet this Mighty One dies to save you. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie His sandals and yet this Mighty One sheds His blood to save me. He serves you; that is the ministry of the Mighty One – to serve you. "Comfort, comfort my people says your God" (Isaiah 40:1). The Mighty One is our comfort. Christ crucified and risen is a very present comfort. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins" (Isaiah 1:2). All of humanity is comforted in Christ's wounds. They are for you. Tenderly, He brings you His forgiveness, His life, and His salvation. They are for you. The fruit of His life is brought to your sin-parched lips – take, eat, this is my body, given for you; take, drink, this is my blood, shed for you. He treats you tenderly because He loves you. In reply, we echo Mary: "The Mighty One has done great things for me and Holy is His Name" (Luke 1:49).

Prepared; turn that word around; from us preparing for Him to Him preparing for us. Prepared; Jesus said that His Father prepared a body for Him (Hebrews 10:5). That preparation was for you. Your salvation was prepared by God Himself being conceived and born – true God and true

man – in a fleshly body just like yours yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). Prepared; Jesus prepared for us a crown of life by wearing a crown of thorns. Prepared; Jesus said that He goes to prepare a place for you, that you may be where He is (John 14:3). Heaven; the Mighty One has prepared a place for you in heaven. Now, prepare *His* way. He is coming.