

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church + Modesto, California
The Second Sunday in Advent
December 8, 2002

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Mark 1:1-8

¹ *The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

² *It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"—³ "a voice of one calling in the desert, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."*

⁴ *And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ 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.*

⁶ *John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ 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. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (NIV)*

Critical Things to Remember at Christmas

There are entirely too many things to remember at this time of year. That's my opinion, at least. With all that needs to be done and bought and prepared, it's too much for an absentminded person like me.

I suppose you could make the case that some things simply must be remembered at Christmas, or Christmas just wouldn't seem like Christmas. If we forgot to put up the tree or to get any presents, it wouldn't seem right. And the list could go on.

That's from our perspective. God has a perspective, too. From his point of view, there are also things that must be remembered at Christmastime. We hear what those things are by listening to John the Baptist. He led people to think about and remember the critical things they needed to remember when Jesus was about to come on the scene. And as we approach our Christmas celebration, getting ready for Jesus to come on the scene, we should listen to John. Through him we hear critical things to remember at Christmas. Today we will look at Mark, chapter one, the part about John's ministry, and through some keywords remember some critical things about us and about Jesus.

"Prepare"

Mark introduces John the Baptist by recalling words written hundreds of years before John arrived on the scene, words of other prophets of God that foretell John's work: "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...

Prepare the way for the Lord... Makes sense, right? When someone's coming, you get things ready. When that someone is someone important, you take extra care to get

things ready. Whether it's your great-aunt Myrtle or old friends or your boyfriend coming over to meet your parents for the first time, you want things prepared for their arrival.

For John the Baptist, the one coming was Jesus. Jesus was around already; he was just a few months younger than John. But Jesus hadn't officially started his public work yet. Soon he would. He would be on the scene, visible, teaching with authority, working wonders, announcing the arrival of the kingdom of God. So John said, "Get ready."

There's something implied in that, isn't there? Isn't it implied that people weren't prepared, that they weren't ready for Jesus to show up? It's true. The people to whom John preached weren't ready—nor are we—for Jesus to show up and be among us. Preparation is required.

What that preparation is, we find out as Mark continues...

"Confess"

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.

Confessing their sins... This is how John wanted people to prepare for Jesus to arrive. Really, this is how God, who sent John, wanted people to prepare. By confessing their sins. By being baptized. John told people to own up to their inherent filthiness, their sinful selfishness, their pride, their anger, their laziness, their pettiness and spitefulness. He wanted them to admit to all of it, to confess it instead of glossing over it, then have God wash it all away.

Confession of sin isn't exactly in vogue in America at Christmastime. This is not the time to call to mind our sins. Rather, says our culture, this is the time to focus on the good in people. You can even hear this line of thinking at this time of year: "See how people are caring for one another and showing good will around the holidays? That just proves that people are good deep down." Have you heard something like that? Well, let me ask this, then: If people are really so good at heart, why can't they be nice the whole year round?! Why just at Christmas?

The fact is—John the Baptist knew it, God knows it, we know it—we are sinful and unclean. The time before Jesus arrives on the scene at Christmas is a time to admit that. Not to cover our sin, not to deny it or ignore it or gloss over it, but to confess it.

"Not worthy"

John the Baptist himself did that, and he sets an example for us. When he talked about Jesus, who was soon coming, here's what he said: After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.

The thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie... Tying and untying sandals was dirty work. Still is—I wouldn't relish the opportunity to stoop down and tie or untie someone's shoes. And if I asked you out in the narthex after the service to stoop down and tie my shoes, well, you'd be insulted! We tie the shoes of our kids and grandkids and nieces and nephews, but that's it. In the time of Jesus, tying and untying sandals was the work of servants.

But John said that he wasn't worthy even of that. To not be worthy means to not match up. Stooping down to untie Jesus' sandals—John considered that to be too high a privilege for him. He didn't match up.

If we do what John urges us to do, we will come to the same conclusion. We'd maybe like to believe that the happiness of Christmas is something we're entitled to, something we deserve after surviving the other eleven months of the year. But the truth is that we are not worthy of this baby whose birth we celebrate.

So John tells us some critical things to remember about ourselves at Christmas. He tells us to prepare for Jesus' coming, to prepare by coming clean and confessing our sins to him. When we do that, we will admit that we do not deserve the joy that he brings.

When we look at ourselves, there is bad news. But we can't leave it there. We can't because of what Mark wrote in the very first verse of his book. Did you catch it? The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ... *The gospel.* "Gospel" is a church word that we use a lot. Do you know what it means? It means simply "good news." Mark establishes, right at the outset, that he is writing good news. And not just any good news, but the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. You see, when we look at sinful selves honestly, we get bad news. It is when we look at Jesus that good news comes.

For each one of the things to remember about ourselves (prepare, confess, not worthy) there is some corresponding good thing about Jesus to remember.

"Prepare"... "Coming"

Jesus didn't have to come. He didn't have to be born of Mary that first Christmas. He could have looked at each one of us and said, "I hate to tell you this, but...you're a mess! I mean, you look okay on the outside sometimes, but I see inside. Come to you? I don't think that's going to happen."

But that isn't what Jesus did. John spoke of the one more powerful than he *who was coming*. Jesus has come. He came into a world full of sinners like us. He still comes. In fact, if you are a person messed up by sin, a person who knows, who confesses the sin that lies deep inside, then you're exactly the kind of person Jesus loves to be with.

Jesus still comes to us. Whenever his word is spoken, it's as if Jesus were right there speaking it himself. When his holy Supper is offered, that's Jesus there, really present among us.

"Confess"... "Forgiveness"

What does Jesus do when he comes? We see as we look at John: And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The people came. They confessed their sins. It didn't end there, however. John baptized them, and through that washing God washed their sins away.

This is why John called on people to prepare the way for the Lord. This is why they confessed their sins. They prepared their hearts and God came to them. They confessed their sins and God forgave them. There was a good news ending to a bad news beginning.

That's a critical thing to remember this Christmas. This Jesus, whose incarnation and birth we celebrate—he came to us. And when he did, he did something with our sin. He didn't conceal it, he didn't rationalize it, minimize it or explain it away. He dealt with it. He took it on himself. He was condemned for it. He died for it. Now he lives again,

and when we confess our sins, he sends them away. We won't be punished for them, because he already was. Jesus doesn't ignore our sin, he forgives it.

“Not worthy” ... “Holy Spirit”

John, thinking of his own sinfulness, considered himself unworthy to untie the sandals of Jesus. Nevertheless, Jesus forgave him and gave him important work to do. So important that Jesus said that no one greater than John had ever been born. John, who confessed he didn't match up to Jesus, was forgiven and lifted up.

Jesus still lifts up sinful people and uses them to do important things. That's what John hinted at when he said this about Jesus: I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. He was talking about the day of Pentecost. After Jesus died and rose from the dead, he sent his Holy Spirit in special measure to all those who follow him. The Holy Spirit was at work already in the time of John the Baptist, of course. It was the Holy Spirit leading people to confess their sins and believe in the forgiveness they received. But after Pentecost the Holy Spirit came bringing his gifts even more abundantly.

Jesus has taken you and me, forgiven us and declared us to be holy. He has given us the Holy Spirit, enabling us to serve him and one another. He fills our lives with evidence of his work: kindness, self-control, patience, goodness and more. He gives special talents to serve him and one another. God has elevated us unworthy sinners to be his partners! We are valuable, because the Holy Spirit has given us value. We are useful to God himself because his Holy Spirit has made us so.

“Come on, preacher. Can't we just drop this sin/forgiveness stuff for awhile? Can't we think about something a little more lighthearted? Everybody else is this time of year. This sin and forgiveness and confessing and the word of God—can't we just forget about this for awhile?”

Uh, no. We can't. It's too important. Among all the things to remember this season, it is critical to remember something about us: that we are sinners. And most of all, it's critical to remember some things about Jesus: he comes to us, forgives us and lifts us up to a high and holy position.

Remember these things, and you'll be well prepared for Christmas. Amen.