

MONOLOGUE - Advent 2: *Dec. 6, 2020*

On the Road to Repentance

John the Baptist prepares the way

based on Mark 1:1-8

From the Fall 2020 Leader Lectionary Guide

Come (*motioning*), come closer and hear the words of the Lord. You ventured this far into the wilderness. Can't you take a few steps more? What prevents you? Is it your ignorance, your fear, or your sin? Do you think you have no sin? Do you stand there counting your generosity and good deeds against the judgment of sin that the Lord casts before you? If so, you are a fool, just one more fool in a world drowning in sin. You reek of it. It oozes out of you like waste and decay. If you have simply come to gawk, then leave. There is nothing for you here.

The time is at hand when you must prepare yourselves for the coming of the Messiah. Turn away from your sins and ask for forgiveness from the One who made you. You cannot avoid the tax that is coming due. You cannot run or hide from it. The only path that does not end in ruin is the one that leads to God.

If you are honest, you know you need to repent. Look at the flowing waters of the Jordan. When you come with repentance in your heart, I will baptize you in the name of the Lord. And the water—it will be as if it washes you clean. You will arise into new life, with your sins forgiven, prepared to meet the judgment to come. If you choose not to renounce your sins, no other decisions will be needed. You have also chosen the outcome of your trial, and you have chosen the executioner over your salvation. The choice belongs to each of you. Who will come?

Do not be deaf! Open your hearts and minds to hear the truth of these words. And yes, I mean you (*pointing*), and you (*pointing*), and you (*pointing*). Not one person here, including myself, will be free from judgment. Now is the time to exchange your worldly goals for heavenly wisdom and to ask God's forgiveness of your sins. His arms are open, and he is waiting. But he will not wait forever.

Those of you who count yourselves as pillars of your community, leaders of the church, or wealthy beyond recognition, I tell you now that your prominence and prestige, your importance and stature, your money and privilege, hold no value in the court of the Lord. They will not save you from your sins. Indeed, when you value these above all else, they become a plague on your house. You cannot bargain or buy yourself into God's favor. Only one road leads you into God's light, and it has nothing to do with who you are or what you have.

It has to do with the state of your heart. This is true of the most important and the lowliest among you. God makes no distinction. We all like to believe we are the masters of our own destiny, but it is only when you put yourself on the road of repentance, when you humble yourself, admit your sin, and acknowledge your need for forgiveness, that the Lord will recognize you.

You can reject me, scorn me, and call me a liar. If you think I care what your opinion is of me, you are wrong. You can ignore my message, call it a hoax or deception, but the only one you will be deceiving is yourself. Rejecting the message doesn't mean the message is not authentic or absolute. No, rejecting the message only proves you are a colossal fool. Truth is truth, and your opposition, disbelief, or ridicule does not change it. God's law is undeniable, unshakable, and indisputable, whether you choose to acknowledge it or not. Your life is utterly dependent on him.

I tell you again, heed my words as one who calls to you in the wilderness. Prepare the way for the Lord. Put your house in order, make straight the paths before you, and anticipate his coming. Seek that which is from God and not the trappings of man. Acknowledge your sins and ask for forgiveness. Do it now! Today! Time is growing short.

Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee, cannot forgive your sins or guarantee your salvation. Neither can Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea, or the mighty Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus,

emperor of the world. Only God can do this, and the time is coming when he will make himself known. These men will bow to the true King.

Do not think I am the one who has come to save you. I am not. I am only a servant who has come to give you fair warning. Someone will come after me, one who is powerful, one whose sandals I am not worthy to unfasten. I come before him as a mere messenger, cautioning you that the time is near. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and save your souls.

Turn to God. I beg you, do it today. You will not find forgiveness simply listening to me. You must act. Look around. Look where you are. Your boasts and achievements and wealth mean nothing. The lies you tell yourself about your honesty and integrity sink into the sand at your feet. You need to ready yourselves, and the road to readiness involves repentance. You cannot become transformed without confession. To ignore the message is ruin.

Who will come? Will you?

=====

Mark 1:1-8 New International Version
John the Baptist Prepares the Way

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah,^[a] the Son of God,^[b] **2** as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way”^[c]—

3 “a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”^[d]

4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, 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 comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. **8** I baptize you with^[e] water, but he will baptize you with^[f] the Holy Spirit.”

+++++

SERMON

On the Road to Repentance

Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13;
2 Peter 3:8-15a; **Mark 1:1-8**

Fred Craddock, a well known preacher and scholar, tells the story about a young pastor who visited an elderly lady who was very sick in a hospital. He entered the room and saw a person lying on the bed, gasping for breath. He decided to have a short visit, not to tire her. So he asked, "Would you like me to pray for you?"

She nodded yes.

"What would you like me to pray?" asked the young preacher?

"I want you to pray that I will be made well, that God will give me health," the lady said.

The preacher gulped. But he prayed, some thing like, "God, if it be thy will, restore this sister to health. However, let us accept thy will, so that whether she receives her health or not, she will know that you are still close to her."

When the prayer ended, the elderly lady's eyes flashed open. She sat up. She startled the young preacher by throwing her legs over the side of the bed. She stood up. She stretched out her arms. She turned around to the astonished preacher and said, "I feel better. I feel a great deal better. In fact, I feel like I have been healed!" With that she walked out of the room, headed down the hall toward the nurse's station, shouting, "I am healed!"

The young preacher staggered out, went down the stairs, out the door of the hospital into the parking lot. As he stood at his car, before opening the door, the preacher looked up and said. "Don't you ever do that to me again!"

There are a lot of people who believe in God, and yet miss the good news. For them God is always coming, but never here. God is always promising, but never delivering. God is always near, but never quite in touch. But this isn't so!

We believe - God lives. God is here. God is coming here. We can see it in the face of a new born baby. We can see it in the gaze of young lovers. We can see it in the look of old married couples. We can see it within our own hearts, when we take time to look. We see it in the beauty of nature around us. We can see it when we hear stories of people responding to the Almighty's call to repent; people turning around; making U-turns of their lives. We see God with us in those making a highway for their Savior & living on the road to restoration.

God will accomplish his purpose. The kingdom will come. The question for us is - will we get on the road of readiness and of repentance? Will we be a part of the fulfilment of God's purpose? Will we light a candle for those around us, for this world, and for ourselves?

It can be hard for us to understand John the Baptist today. As hard for us now as it was for the people who gathered in the wilderness to hear his words some 2000 years ago. Few people then really comprehended what John meant when he declared his mission was "to prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight." Fewer still could even begin to understand him when he said, "After me comes one whose sandals I am not worthy to untie". And among those who responded to his words "Repent and be baptized," there must have been complete confusion when he declared, "I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

What was John about? How did he sense God's call? Why did he do what he did? And what importance does he have for us today?

John the Baptist is the very voice of Advent - the voice of the coming of the Lord Jesus to earth to intervene in the relationship between God and ourselves. What he said was not merely a word about Jesus, it was the Gospel. It was the continuation and a new beginning of the Good News for the world.

John and his message happened at the beginning of Jesus' ministry on this earth. And that message is still the beginning today, for all those who want to walk with Jesus. For all those who want to find their way out of the wilderness of their lives and of this world, into the promised land. For those who answer the invitation and call to get on the road to repentance. It is a fact, as the old Chinese proverb tells us, that a journey of a thousand miles must begin with one step. That's our work today - to get onto the road of readiness & repentance.

John came to point out what that step must be. He pointed out that the way of the Lord must be prepared, and that way is not simply a highway in the desert. But rather it is a highway in our hearts, a direction and a step that we must take, an attitude change, a U-turn, if we are to be ready for Christ's coming.

When the heart is moving in readiness, there is an openness to the "new." Perhaps the fresh thing God wants to do. To embrace the new requires a letting go of the past. The prophet Isaiah invites consideration or recognition of something greater that is coming. The road to repentance offers a new opportunity by the power of God's forgiveness. It is a gift given tenderly, with gentleness. To be forgiven is a cleansing, a renewal, a fresh start.

The psalmist in our text today, declares that repentance is an attitude marked by a willingness to hear from God and receive the good that the Lord will offer to us.

The epistle of 2 Peter catches something of the gentleness of the gift from God in that "the Lord is patient with you, not wanting any to perish." Our Savior has a willingness to walk a long way on the road with us. We are urged to live holy and godly lives. We are instructed to make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with the Almighty.

And our gospel scripture, Mark, even with its warning, shares the good news that power is available. The good news comes with transforming power, changing us from the inside out as we turn around.

The opening of Mark's Gospel reminds us of the decentering of God's good news which is found on the edge of everything. It goes beyond the boundaries of where we thought God was supposed to be – in the Temple. We find ourselves not in the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem but outside of her city walls, in the margins, on the sidelines. The good news of God brings hope to those who find themselves in the peripheries of our world, and it belongs there. God's good news of grace announces God's presence on the fringe. God's love goes beyond the boundaries of where we thought God was supposed to be, that box we keep him in. And God's promises that there is no place on earth God will not go or be for us.

A sense of urgency pervades these opening episodes in Mark. The critical time has arrived; God's reign is breaking in, and there is no time to dawdle. This announcement of God's in-breaking reign may come as threatening news to us. It is much more comfortable to think of God safely beyond the heavens, benignly looking down on us. If God is "on the loose" in Jesus, alive and active in our world, then we are not in control.

There is no telling what God might do, or what God might ask of us. Might we be called to drop everything & follow Jesus on a risky mission to prepare the way, straight-ten the highway and be on the road repenting?

There is no escaping the call. Yet this is good news. Through Jesus, God is on a mission to reclaim the world as God's own, beginning with each of us. Through our baptism into Christ, we too are declared God's beloved children, "possessed" by the Holy Spirit, and enlisted for God's mission. God's gracious claim on our lives defines us, gives us purpose and direction.

In the Zen tradition of the Far East this idea is expressed in a story about a university professor who went to visit the great master Nan-In one day. He said, "Master, - teach me what I need to know to have a happy life. I have studied the sacred scriptures. I have visited the greatest teachers in the land, but I have not found the answer. Please - teach me the way."

At this point Nan-In served tea to his guest. He poured his visitor's cup full, kept on pouring and pouring so that the tea began to run over the rim of the cup & across the table, & still he poured, until tea was cascading upon the floor.

The professor watched this until he could no longer restrain himself. "Its overfull, stop, no more will go in," he cried out.

"Like this cup," Master Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you the way unless you first empty your cup?"

How can we welcome Christ, how can we enter the promised land with him, if we have no room in our hearts for him, if we are not on the road to readiness, if we are not prepared, and not on the road to repentance?

What does the repent mean? Quite simply it means to "turn around." To change direction. To embrace a new way. To begin to walk in that way, leaving the old way behind. Repent means give the Almighty room to work a miracle in our lives. So each of us must change direction if we are to truly see the Lord and walk with Yahweh from wilderness to the promised land in our thinking, actions & belief.

John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord, by preparing the hearts of all who were willing to hear him and to repent. John called to the people to hear his message and to take action, get on the road to repentance, turn around, so that they would be able to greet the Messiah, and walk in his way.

To take a somewhat silly analogy, children play a game called "Hide-and-Seek" in which everyone hides and tries not to get caught. But eventually, when the game goes as it should, everyone gets found. The game is interesting from a psychological point of view because "hiding" is not really very much fun. If you ask most children, "Do you want to sit somewhere all by yourself and keep very quiet for a long time?" you will not get many takers. What's fun about "Hide-and-Seek" is not hiding, but getting found. Everybody likes to be found.

So, when Advent comes around every year, we are reminded that God is coming to find us. We have our many ways of hiding. But when John the Baptist shouts, "Repent and be baptized! Prepare the way of the Lord!" it is as though God has just called, "Ready or not, here I come! Get on the road to repentance!" And we remember: our Creator is the Almighty God who always finds us.