

St. Leavals & steps to River St.
entrance, used to be cleared

Vivian Brown
O.T. - Psalm, Epistle

BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE

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

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister,

Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, Pa

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Christmas season is a time for keeping secrets. When I was a boy everything leading up to Christmas was veiled in secrecy. Presents were hidden. My parents put up the Christmas tree secretly on Christmas Eve after I was asleep. Only on Christmas morning were the secrets revealed. Most of us, however, like to be let in on secrets ahead of time. Just as we feel privileged when a friend reveals a secret to us, Saint Mark lets readers in on the secret of who Jesus is in the first verse. Read the gospel and you'll discover few people knew Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. Peter doesn't confess Jesus as the Christ until the ninth chapter. Ironically, the only ones who know the secret are demons that cry, "I know who you are!" and the pagan Roman soldier who says at the foot of the cross, "Surely this is the Son of God." But the identity of Jesus remains a secret to his disciples until after the resurrection.

Often secrets we're let in on contain good news like. "Don't tell anybody yet, but I'm getting an engagement ring for Christmas." The secret of who Jesus is also contains good news. "I'm going to let you in on a secret?" Mark says. "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. That's good news?" In George Eliot's novel, Adam Bede, Dinah, a young Methodist, preaches on the village green. She tells villagers how she first came to know the message of Jesus as good news. She was a just a little girl when she heard a man preaching, not in a church, but in the open air. "I remember his face well," she says. "He was a very old man, and had very long white hair his voice was very soft and beautiful. This old man seemed to me such a different sort of a man from anybody I'd ever seen before that I thought he'd perhaps come down (from heaven) to preach to us. That man of God was Mr. Wesley who spent his life doing what our Lord did - preaching the Gospel to the poor." She goes on, "I remembered only one thing he told us in his sermon. He told us 'Gospel' meant 'good news.'" She said, "The Gospel is what the Bible tells us about God. Think of that!" she said. "Jesus Christ did really come down from heaven. And what he came down for was to tell good news about God to the poor." Dinah was absolutely right. Unfortunately, the Gospel of Jesus Christ has not always been preached as good news. Sometimes it's used as a weapon and preached as a threat. "God loves you and will send you to hell if you

don't believe it." That's not the gospel! The gospel is good news. One of my greatest joys is preaching the good news of Jesus Christ – good news to sinners, doubters, unbelievers and outcasts. *It has come down to us, to our level, into Bill & Jesus*

John the Lord
John the Baptist prepared a way for the Good News to get through to liberate us. He was like a soldier in the Corp of Engineers who helped prepare the way for the D-day invasion in World War 2, laying down a road on the sand of Omaha beach so heavy vehicles could follow and liberate Germany and the hellish concentration camps. John the Baptist prepared the way for God's D-day invasion. God, in Christ, established a beachhead in the world enabling him to go on to conquer sin on the cross and liberate us from Satan's prison. We're here this morning because somebody like John the Baptist prepared the way for the Good News to get through to us. Lack of preparedness can be tragically fatal as we discovered on December 7, 1941. But, thank God, John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord to liberate us.

I thought of John the Baptist last Saturday as I began Christmas preparations. Mark, Philip and I went out, cut down a tree and put it up. I brought decorations from the basement. Kay held up ornaments that had special meaning and said things like, "My sister, Lucy, made this one. I miss her so much." John the Baptist did something like that to prepare the way of the Lord. He took the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah, held it up like a Christmas tree ornament, and explained its meaning for him. And just as churches get out costumes of Joseph and Mary for Christmas pageants, John the Baptist put on a leather belt and coat of camel hair - the costume of the Old Testament prophet Elijah whom everybody expected to precede the coming of the Lord.

John prepared the way for the Good News of Jesus Christ through preaching. He preached, first, confession of sin. Confession of sin doesn't sound like good news unless we recall the old proverb "Confession is good for the soul." I experienced the truth of that proverb years ago when some members of our church visited Bill and Carol Warner before Christmas when Bill was dying of cancer. We gathered round his bed and sang Christmas carols to tell him how much we loved him. But before that, when I got to the house, before putting my car in "park", I opened the door. The car started rolling backward and the opened door caught on a stone wall, wrecking the door. I feared telling Kay. For the next several days I parked so she couldn't see the damage. But I was miserable until I confessed. Fortunately, she forgave me - after a long lecture - and I felt

relieved. Confession is good for the soul. When we confess our sin we're relieved of guilt that makes us miserable. It's good news that we can be honest with a God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness.

Second, John prepared the way of the Lord by preaching repentance. Repentance means our past need not determine our future. That's wonderful news? Have you ever heard someone say, "That man has a past" meaning — there's scandal in his past? We all have a past but repentance is the good news that our future need not be determined by our past. What I hate about Thomas Hardy's novels is how the past actions of his characters lead inexorably to tragedy. ^{Tess of the D'Urbervilles} And what I love about the novels of Dostoyevsky is how, through God's grace, his characters are able to repent of the evil they've done. ^{Crime and Punishment, The Idiot, The Brothers Karamazov} Dostoyevsky was a Christian. He knew that, through the good news of repentance, our past need not determine our future.

Third, John preached baptism for the remission of sin.⁴ In the baptismal liturgy I pray, "Send your Spirit to move over this water that it may be a fountain of deliverance and rebirth. Wash away the sin of all who are cleansed by it. Raise them to new life, and graft them to the body of Christ. Pour out your Holy Spirit upon them, that they may have power to do your will, and continue forever in the risen life of Christ." Baptism proclaims the good news that sins may be forgiven and life begin again.

As you prepare for Christmas, please don't bypass John the Baptist. I want to greet the babe born in Bethlehem as much as anyone. My ears ache to hear heavenly hosts sing Alleluia on Christmas Eve. But before we greet the good news of the birth of Christ, John the Baptist prepares the way for the Lord to enter our lives by calling us to confess sin and renew our baptism through repentance. Amen.