

## PREPARING THE WAY OF THE LORD

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

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December 5, 1999

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*"A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" Isaiah 40:3*

*"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Mark 1:3*

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

"Prepare the way of the Lord", John proclaims. "Make his paths straight." Advent is a time of preparation. We sing,

Let every heart prepare him room.

But how do we prepare?

We repent! That's the most important way we prepare for the coming of Christ. The Gospel of Mark begins with John the Baptist calling us to repent. Repentance certainly isn't the final word of the Gospel but it's a beginning word. So I want to talk about repentance. I don't really want to *talk* about repentance. I want us to *repent*. I want us *all* to repent and prepare the way for the Lord. There's something within us that wants us to repent. A voice cries in the wilderness of our hearts. Listen to the voice! The voice calls us to repent.

Repentance! John the Baptist preached repentance. He appears in the Judean wilderness clothed with camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist. John the Baptist dressed like Elijah, a prophet who lived 800 years before John the Baptist. John consciously adopted the clothing of an Old Testament prophet. **John was a prophet. He wasn't an evangelist.** Evangelists - I'm not talking about TV evangelists - but real evangelists reach out to all kinds of people outside the church. For example, **Jesus was an evangelist**, going out to find lost sheep, touching lepers, eating and drinking with sinners. **Mother Theresa was a modern day evangelist** bringing the love of Christ to India's untouchables. And we have evangelists in our very own church here in Oxford. But John wasn't an evangelist. He was a prophet. Prophets preach mostly to church people. Prophets call God's people to **put up or shut up**. Prophets call us to

live up our responsibilities as church members. Prophets **hurl threats** at God's people. Prophets **warn** God's people. Prophets **call** God's people sinners. Prophets **don't coddle us**. Prophets **warn of hell and damnation**. Above all, prophets **call us to repent**. John the Baptist was a prophet. He called God's people to repent.

**John addressed God's people as if they were pagans**. "Get baptized," he preached. In those days, unclean gentiles got baptized if they converted to Judaism. Old Testament Jews weren't baptized. They were already clean. But John called Jews to be baptized. "You're no different than Gentile sinners! Repent! Confess your sins! Get baptized." You wouldn't think that kind of preaching would attract many people, but it did. "People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him." John prepared them for the coming of Jesus by calling them to repent.

**The church reads the story of John the Baptist on the second Sunday of Advent**. Advent means coming. We're preparing for the coming of Jesus. Advent reminds us that the best way to prepare room for Christ in our hearts is through repentance.

But **how do we repent?** How do we change the way we think? How do we change deeply ingrained prejudices and habits? That's the \$64,000 question. We've tried to repent! I know I've tried. We try to repent of all kinds of sins. We've repented hundreds, thousands of times! How many times have you had to say, "I'm sorry." How many times have you said, "**I won't let it happen again**." How many times have you said, "**I'll try harder next time**." Repentance isn't easy. Change is extremely difficult. Sometimes, after failing many times, I wonder if repentance is even possible. I want to give up.

When I feel that way I remind myself that **repentance is a process rather than a once-and-for-all decision**. Repentance is a life long process. T. S. Eliot, in his "Poems 'From the Rock.'" describes the life of most Christians who try to live penitent lives.

Bestial as always before, carnal, self-seeking as always before,  
selfish and purblind as ever before.  
Yet always struggling, always reaffirming, always resuming  
their march on the way that was lit by the light;

Often halting, loitering, straying, delaying, returning, yet following no other way...

Eliot was a Christian. He was describing his own struggles. He was describing the struggle all Christians experience. Repentance is something we do throughout our lives. Eliot helps me remember that repentance is not a once and for all decision. It's the beginning of a life-long process - a life long journey out of darkness and into the light. **We're on a journey. And as we journey** on we often halt, we loiter, we stray, we delay, yet, because the Spirit of Christ burns within us, we're always resuming our march, following no other way than the way that is lit by the light of Christ.

**Repentance is like keeping your driveway clear of snow if you live Buffalo**, New York. You shovel your driveway every morning in the winter. You make a path straight to your car. You make a path straight for the mailman. But every night it snows again and you begin the process all over again all winter. Repentance is like shoveling winter snow in Buffalo. You have to do it over and over again.

**Repentance is like learning to walk.** When our children learn to walk they often stumble and fall. Sometimes they hurt themselves. We don't scold them. We don't condemn them. We encourage them. "You can do it!" "Keep trying!" We encourage rather than scold because we're sure that their stumbles and falls are all part of the process of learning to walk. We can't learn to walk without stumbling and falling and hurting ourselves over and over. We learn to repent the same way that we learn to walk. Scolding doesn't help us repent. Threats don't work. Punishment and blame produce only temporary results. We need encouragement, support, and assurance of forgiveness in order for us to repent.

**Some of us may be thinking about following Christ seriously. Some of us have been walking with Christ for decades** and we still stumble and fall and we have lots of bruises. But the God who comes to us in Christ **doesn't scold** us. God **doesn't condemn** us. God, in Christ **comforts** us. God calls us to comfort others. "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. Speak tenderly." God comes to us in Jesus Christ. "See, the Lord God comes with might." **He feeds**

us with his Word and Sacraments. **He gathers us** in his arms and **carries us** in his bosom when we fall. All we like sheep have gone astray. But **the Good Shepherd comes to us** in Jesus Christ and searches for us until he finds us. The ordinary way God does this is through the preaching of the Word, the sacraments and the fellowship of the people of God.

**In other words, repentance isn't something we do all by ourselves** in the isolation of our own lonely individualism. Repentance isn't a matter of just saying "No" to sin. It's not a matter of our own individual selves struggling heroically. We need other repentant people to help us repent. God gathers us in his arms through the person sitting next to us or across from us in the pew. He speaks tenderly to us through one another.

**Repentance is the first word in Mark's Gospel, but grace is the final word.** God's grace enables us to turn from evil in the world and sin in our own hearts and turn to Jesus Christ. God's empowering grace enables us to turn to Christ day after day throughout our lives. I beg you this morning - trust God's gracious mercy. Repent! Repent this morning. Repent tonight. Repent tomorrow morning. Turn to Christ. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight." Someone greater than John the Baptist is on his way. Prepare to meet him. We've all been baptized with water. But he will baptize us with the Holy Spirit.

God of our salvation,  
you straighten the winding ways of our hearts  
and smooth the paths made rough by sin.  
Keep our conduct blameless,  
keep our hearts watchful in holiness,  
and bring to perfection the good you have begun in us.  
We ask this through him whose coming is certain,  
whose day draws near,  
your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, forever and ever. Amen.