

Mark 1:1-8
Second Sunday in Advent
December 10, 2023

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, the opening verses of St Mark's gospel account, highlighting the preparatory person and work of John the Baptist this way: "John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Mark's gospel begins dramatically: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God!" What a great opening line! And, where does it point? It points back to the prophecy of Isaiah, as heard in our Old Testament reading, the prophecy of Isaiah which promised that *some day*... some day way in the future (in fact, 700 years later), the prophecies would be fulfilled... and, at some point in the actual timeline of history, that fulfillment would *begin* to unfold.

Imagine waiting 700 years for that promise to unfold. For example, 700 years ago, Dante's *Divine Comedy* was written; the Teutonic knights were crusading eastern Europe, and the Aztecs were settling in what is now Mexico City. A lot has happened in the last 700 years.

Yes, 700 years... a long time for God's people to wait since the prophecy of Isaiah... and be tempted to give up on the

prophecy of Isaiah. And then, Mark's gospel says, "John appeared." Just as the Lord prophesied through the prophet Isaiah and – 300 years after Isaiah – through the prophet Malachi – the messenger would come (some 400 years after Malachi, 700 years after Isaiah), "Elijah" would come – and He would prepare the way for the Christ and thereby be the first 'fulfillment detail' to which all people could point and say, "Now! God is *now* fulfilling His Word."

Last week, the children's program wonderfully helped us begin our Advent season by focusing on the double-meaning of that phrase, "He will come." By all means, Jesus will come. The Christ will come. But, according to God's design and plan, the phrase ought also include mention of the forerunner John: "*After me* comes one who is mightier than I." Doesn't the "after me" imply that the coming of John is, in fact, part of the divine unveiling of the Gospel promise's fulfillment? So, yes, he will come; John will come – the voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

Now, we could spend all our time highlighting this relationship between the forerunner and Messiah, or highlighting the sudden 'buzz and flurry of excitement' in a Judea and Jerusalem that were, for 400 years, silent of all divinely-meaningful activity. But, what good would it be to focus on such

matters in history if we did not consider how universally the Advent preaching goes out: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

You and I could interpret that in our own way, come up with ingenious ways to claim we are preparing ourselves for the Lord’s coming. (And, we’d probably be pretty proud of some of our self-disciplining notions of increased righteous preparedness – maybe you volunteer at church or give money to charity or work at a food bank.) But, John the Baptizer leaves nothing to our own interpretation, for he is sent to do the preparing: “John appeared, *baptizing... and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*” And what is the response of the crowds to his preparatory preaching but that they were “being baptized by him ..., confessing their sins.”

Now, what would make *that* preparation for the Lord’s coming any better than our own ideas? Wouldn’t it actually seem a better effort, a more involved and dedicated effort, to go do things for people or at least to improve our efforts at Christian love rather than to simply confess sins in the baptismal life?

To answer that, one must consider what it means that John says, “One comes after me that is mightier than I... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” Why doesn’t John say, “One comes after me who is kinder than I, gentler than I”? After all, we

always consider John as one preaching fire and brimstone, giving way to One who comes with compassion and welcomes children. But, here, John says Jesus is mightier... says Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

That could (and should) be interpreted to speak of Jesus' divinity. This is most certainly true. But, elsewhere, the gospels also record John's preparatory preaching this way: "[The One who comes after me] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." And again, "The axe is already laid to the root of the tree. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

"Bear good fruit?" you might say; "then let me clamor about and do good things and then God will be pleased, and I'll escape the fire!"

How often do we make the mistake of thinking that we can make God pleased with us... that we can stand in front of Him like some court jester and entertain or please Him... and, if our show flops, Jesus will be there to have pity on us and say, "At least this little one's attempt was sincere and well-intended"... and that this is somehow the economy of salvation!

But John calls to repentance because before the Mighty God our life is not one of moralistic improvement. John prepares us by calling to repentance because he knows we are not simply being saved from the mere presence of sin in our lives, but we are being saved from *the wrath of the glorious God* who will judge the reality of our sin-plagued lives.

If it was simply a matter of being freed from the presence of sin in your life, John would just teach you how to self-improve. But, to be most correct about the understanding, the Messiah is not coming to save you from sin in a moralistic sense of teaching you how to make sin absent in your daily life; the Messiah is coming to save you from sin in the sense that the wrath of the glorious God obliterates anything and everything that sin taints, and if you have no Christ to hide in, then you stand in the presence of God stained, marked, tattoo-ed by your sin. Our proper preface in the communion liturgy says John “called sinners to repentance that they might escape from the wrath to be revealed when [Christ] comes again in glory.”

In other words, John says, “This one that is coming today comes in grace; tomorrow He will come in glory. Flee to Him now while He is gracious, lest you not be safeguarded by Him when He comes to judge.”

In short, John does not prepare you by saying, “Get better at not sinning.” He prepares you by saying, “Sin will be judged. Flee to the one who can hide you from your own guilt, even if it’s the same One who will one day come again in glory to judge the sinner.”

As we said last week, that is the true timeline of God’s dealing with man, isn’t it? Now is the day of salvation; soon will come the day of judgment. If we forget that – if we look only back to the cross and not forward to His return – Christianity becomes mere moralism. Hide in Him now, before it is too late.

Now, such does not mean that as long as we hide in Jesus, our lives may abound in sin. Such is not true repentance. John first baptizes for repentance and the forgiveness of sins, then admonishes and exhorts, “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” And, when the crowds ask, “What shall we do to bear fruit in keeping with repentance?” John doesn’t just say, “Receive forgiveness, then sin again.” Instead, he goes to the heart of their daily vocations and says to the tax collector, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” And to the soldier, he says, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation; instead, be content with your wages.” And (we might ‘connect the dots’) to the sibling he says, “Do not irritate your brother or sister, but love and encourage them in the will of God.” And to the

spouse he says, “Do not be short-tempered with nor indifferent toward the needs of your spouse, but love and cherish that spouse as God’s gift to you, for you are to be God’s gift to them.” And to the parent, he says, “Do not embitter your children and neither let them be undisciplined, but raise them up in the reverence of the Lord.”

Certainly, we ought wrestle with our daily vocations and desire the will of the Lord therein, we ought learn to “desire to do better”... not because our goal and aim is moralistic self-improvement, but because we do not take lightly the great truth that the glorious Christ first came in mercy precisely to save us from the day He will come in glory. Peter says in our Epistle reading, “What sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But, according to His promise, we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”

And, because of that promise, because He is so merciful and because we still live in the day of salvation, we may openly repent of our sins and desire to do better and therefore live the daily life of those who are baptized into the life of repentance for

the forgiveness of sins, “diligent” (Peter says) to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.

This is the very comfort the Lord speaks to His people... not a comfort of unbridled sin in the day of grace before the coming day of destruction, but the comfort that – through the incarnate Christ – our warfare with God is ended, our iniquity pardoned... that He in his mercy gives a double portion of all that our sinful lives strip from us; so diligently live at peace with one another, as you are at peace with Him.

Thus, it is the Lord in his mercy – not merely we in our moral improvement – that lifts up the valley, makes low the mountains, levels uneven ground, and makes the rough places a plain. What a description of our daily life! A life of peaks and valleys, uneven baptismal living with rough patches of wrestling against the Old Adam and all his sinful desires. The Lord comforts us in all this daily baptismal life. But *how* does He comfort us? Not with words of cheering on our self-improvement, but with words of our salvation.

How does Isaiah report it? “Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”

Notice that: the word of our God will stand forever. if it were up to your self-improvement, you’d be nothing but a

withering, fading sinner. But the word of our God stands forever, and that word is the promise of the Christ who will bring the entire fallen world to its completion. Yes, that means the cross, but it also means ‘the *end* of the gospel’ – the Church’s final deliverance. Thus, the Christ – who ‘enfleshed’ that word that stands forever... who made that word to be “the Word made flesh” by invading human history – and, upon the cross, accomplished that word of promise to make it a word of fulfillment... there, on that cross, with outstretched arm, the Messiah opened the doors of paradise and gave safe-haven to all who rightly fear the returning Lord’s wrath upon their sin. This protection from their sins, this protection when He comes again in glory, is the good news of the mountain of Calvary, the good news that is proclaimed upon the heights, as the prophet instructs on behalf of the LORD:

“Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” Behold the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; (yes, those once-outstretched arms have now taken the scroll of life and the seat of the throne)... Behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him (yes, judgment comes...as John testified)... He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms.”

Yes, he will remember His mercy toward his sheep, his sheepfold, his Church... and, in the day of His glorious return, He will preserve you from his wrath, the axe at the root of the tree, and the unquenchable fire.

This is why we rejoice in redemption, why we rejoice in the baptismal life of repentance for the forgiveness of sins – not because it morally improves us (such is fruits of the Gospel, not the Gospel itself), but because by it Christ shields and gathers us from the Day when the Gospel now begun is brought to its glorious conclusion.

Thus, the *beginning* of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the coming of John to prepare us not only for the incarnate presence of the Messiah, but for our redeemed life in the Messiah and for our final deliverance by the Messiah – the Mighty One who will come again to judge the nations and to deliver His Church from the wrath to be revealed when He comes again in His glory.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +