

Listen to God's Forerunner! Mark 1:1-8
2nd Sunday of Advent 12/4/2011 Pastor Aaron Nitz

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, dear friends in Christ, how would you prepare? Where might you start? Imagine someone important coming to Bemidji. Imagine the president of the United States decided to visit Bemidji. What's going to happen? All kinds of preparations, right? Perhaps the city would be decorated, the streets swept, heightened security across town, garbage would be removed, eyes sores would be taken away, lawns mowed or snow shoveled. I'm guessing city officials would be operating at peak performance, Mayor Dave Larson would be dressed in his best suit; many residents would probably rearrange their schedules in order to get a glimpse of the president in person, perhaps even a handshake, so much preparation involved, right? So much preparation for a political leader whose term usually lasts a mere 4 or 8 years and then is almost all but forgotten about as we look on to the next president or leader. Or maybe a little more closer to reality, perhaps you've invited family or friends over to come for the Christmas celebration. There's all kinds of preparations, aren't there? You've got to clean your home, dust the pictures, vacuum the carpet, sweep the floors, put up your Christmas decorations, remove any clutter that's lying around, go to Luekens or Marketplace and stock your fridge, you make a plan of things to do while you have company, etc. There's so much preparation for someone's arrival!

Well there's someone else who's coming that we have to be prepared for. No, it's not grandpa and grandma, mom or dad, or even President Obama, rather it's God. God has made it very clear to us that He's coming. He came once and He's coming again. When He arrives there will be no second chances, no quick sweeping the dirt under the rug, no quick covering the eye sores of sins, no time for last minute cleaning. And since we heard last week that He comes in judgment for those who are unprepared but for mercy to those who are, then it is absolutely essential for each one of us to be prepared! Well, we are properly prepared when we're obeying what God wants us to be doing and cherishing the Word that He tells us. When Jesus comes there will only be two kinds of people that He'll find: those who are prepared and those who are not.

So it is due only to the amazing graciousness and love of our God that in His great mercy He sends us forerunners who help us be prepared for both His first coming as a baby in Bethlehem and His second coming on the Last Day. The Old Testament people had forerunners whom God sent in order to prepare them for the coming Savior. One of those was the prophet Isaiah another was the prophet Malachi. In their writings the Lord said, **"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.'"** God sent messages like these to His people in order that they might be ready, that they might be on the lookout for the one who would prepare the way for the Lord. God sent this prophecy from Isaiah in order that there would be no mistake when John the Baptist came on the scene there would be no trouble recognizing him and recognizing the fact that the Messiah was soon coming after him. Isaiah's message was first to Israelites who were being held in captivity off in the foreign country of Babylon. Off in Babylon they were geographically separated hundreds of miles from their homeland and from God's temple. What separated them? A massive desert. More importantly was not the geography but the reason they were off in a different country: it was because of the massive desert they had constructed in their hearts between them and God because of their sins. The massive hindrance like a desert that needs to be removed is not so much geography as the massive hindrances inside the human heart. The hindrances of sins and impenitence or unrepentant sin- they need to be removed so the Lord can build His highway into the human heart. And that was exactly John the Baptist's message.

In God's great love and mercy He sent John the Baptist to the people before Jesus came on the scene in a full way. God wanted people to be prepared, to realize their sins and absolute need for a Savior so that when He showed up they'd be ready for Him and welcome Him. **"And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."** John was the unmistakable fulfillment from the OT prophecy. Notice that Isaiah had said, **"A voice of one calling in the desert,"** not a person, not even a mouth, why? The messenger is not important, but the message is. John was exactly that. Everything he was and did pointed not to himself or his own gain, but to the message he carried. He didn't wear fancy clothes, he didn't wear Abercrombie or Macy's latest suit, and you wouldn't find him eating fancy food, rather he wore rough camel's hair and ate the poorest of poor man's food: locusts. Since he's so lowly and modest, who would be scared to listen to him? Who would be afraid to go and hear what he has to say? If you're going out to see him, you're not focusing on him, but on His message. You won't be looking at his fancy clothes but listening to what he's saying, that's what's important!

And notice something else, the people had to leave the comfort of their homes to go out and see him. They had to travel 20 miles out into the desert in order to see him. There was no restaurants or rest areas on the way. No cars to jump in and go. They had to rearrange their schedules to make the trek. Why? To refocus on what is most important- the matters of the heart. And look at all the people who went! **"The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem."**

We too have the tendency to get distracted with our creature comforts and forget our real need. What is it that is separating us from God this Advent season? For the people at John the Baptist's time it was any number of things and they literally had to separate themselves from their lives in order to hear God's message from John. What are the roadblocks in our lives hindering the work of the Holy Spirit on our hearts? Distractions in our world that cause us to find every possible excuse to not hear or read God's Word, instead of cherishing every opportunity to hear God's message? Is there a sin that we clutch so close to us that we refuse to let go even though it pushes us further from our God? Do we hold some resentment against God because of some past life experience instead of trusting in God's goodness to us? Finally these are all obstructions in our hearts, mountains and valleys and deserts in our heart that separate us from our God. Is our house in order for the King to arrive? Are we prepared? Are our hearts ready for the most important person this world has ever seen to arrive?

In the midst of people whose focus was primarily on matters of food and drink or house and home here came God's messenger who was different. He appeared in the most lowly manner- wearing a rough garment made of camel skin hair with a leather belt and he ate the most primitive poor man's food: locusts and wild honey. If you're going out to see him you're not focusing on the person, but on His message. You won't be looking at his fancy clothes but listening to what he has to say.

And what a message he had to bring! **"After me will come one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie."** The one coming after John is so great that he's not even worthy to perform the job of the lowest of slaves. John's whole message pointed to the one coming after him. Yes he baptizes with water but the one coming after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Indeed the Holy Spirit was at work creating faith but after Jesus came He would send the Holy Spirit in a much fuller and broader way to work miracles of faith in people even down through today. John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins was made possible by the redeeming work of the one coming after him to which he pointed.

After God's last prophet Malachi it was about four hundred years of waiting until God sent his forerunner, John the Baptist, to prepare the way for His first coming. Today we are still waiting for Jesus to come again. We've been waiting a couple thousand years. One day God will keep His word and come again. Are we ready? We thank the Lord that He has sent His forerunners to us to help us prepare for His 2nd coming!

He has sent forerunners, our forefathers and mothers who have faithfully passed down the message of salvation through the years down until today. In mercy He prepares us for when He comes again so it will be in grace for us and not judgment. He sent us parents who brought us to the baptismal font where we received the forgiveness of sins through the washing of water with the Word. He sent us parents who trained us in the way of the Lord. He sent us parents who made sure we heard the message of God's love through teachers and pastors so we'd be ready for his 2nd coming. He sent us these forerunners, not that they were worthy or mighty on their own, but they came to us in lowliness, like John who wore camels hair and ate meager food, God's forerunners aren't even worthy enough to untie the sandals of the Lord, but since they are so lowly, we didn't have to fear them or dread them, but they brought to us a powerful message- the message of the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

We thank the Lord for all of those forerunners He has sent in our own lives that have prepared us so that when He comes again it won't be for terrible judgment, but to receive mercy, grace and peace. He has prepared us through His awesome message of repentance and grace. Like John's first listeners we confess our sins, acknowledging our complete unworthiness of anything good from God. We acknowledge our complete inability on our own to save ourselves. We acknowledge our desperate need for a Savior. And repentance includes something else as well. It includes trust. Trust in God that He has provided the Savior we need. Our Savior Jesus came into this world for one purpose: to give us the forgiveness of our sins. That was John's message and that's the message that we've heard from the forerunners God has sent into our lives: forgiveness of sins. In the Greek "forgiveness" is a very picturesque word. Literally it means "sending away." And that's what Jesus did for everyone of your sins, He sent them away, how far? As far as the east is from the west, He blotted them out, He cast all your sins in the depths of the sea. Jesus sent away every sin, every bad or wrong thing you've ever done, every evil thought, every wrong deed, he sent them away so far that when He returns again on the Last Day, He won't be able to find them, they're gone, completely, you stand before God as right, as though you never once sinned in your life, your sins have disappeared all because of the work of the one to whom the prophets pointed, John the Baptist pointed, and all the forerunners in your life pointed to as well, Jesus. Thank the Lord for His forerunners, listen to their message, trust in your Savior, and confidently wait because He has made you prepared, yes, come Lord Jesus, Amen.