

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Gospel of Mark begins not with the birth and infancy of Jesus Christ, but with the ministry of John the Baptist, cousin of Jesus and the last of the Old Testament prophets, as John is often called. In these opening verses of the shortest of all the evangelists' accounts, we hear the words of the great prophet, Isaiah, echoed by Mark in the words of John. "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way."¹ The messenger comes into the world from the wilderness, and not from the temple. God's word comes to His people in unexpected ways.

For John the Baptist, his appearance as the prophet of the Most High literally began in the wilderness outside of Jerusalem. From an early age, we are told, John went into the wilderness to prepare himself for the mission to which God had called him—to precede the coming of the Messiah. At the same time, John comes into the "wilderness" known as Judea and Galilee, proclaiming the coming of the Anointed One of God and calling on the people to repent and receive a baptism of repentance as a preparation for the coming baptism by fire and the Holy Spirit that will come at the hands of the One who is to come. God's people were in a spiritual wilderness, drawn away from faithful worship and praise of God and into a legalistic, faith-less mode of worship led by a priestly class who lived in the world as well as of the world. Sacrifices and rules of atonement were no longer acceptable to God as a means of saving His Chosen People. Things needed to change, and it was John the Baptist's job to begin that change process.

To understand the mission of John the Baptist, we need to understand the connection between the Hebrew people during the time of Isaiah and the Hebrew people at the time of John. This is lost in the "shorthand" of Mark's gospel account. You might remember from Sunday School or an earlier sermon that Isaiah was written by at least three prophets whom we know as Isaiah, and the book of Isaiah covers several generations—the time before the exile from Judea at the hands of the Babylonians, the time in exile, and the return from exile after the Persian empire defeated the Babylonians. Beginning with Isaiah 40, we hear the words of the

¹ Mark 1:2b (NRSV)

second Isaiah, proclaiming a message of hope and comfort of a coming restoration and the end of exile. The prophet was no fool, and saw the political situation in which the Babylonians were facing defeat at the hands of the Persian empire. God calls his prophet, Isaiah, and other messengers to bring a message of hope and grace to them, and with it, the promise that God will restore them, and their sins will be forgiven.

This is a change from the message of most of the Old Testament prophets. If we read the words of other prophets of God, the message to the people is that bad things are happening, or going to happen, because God's people have been disobedient to the will of God, and the only way to get out of the situation is to repent and return to a strict obedience to the will of God. However, this time, the message is different. This time, we hear the prophet bring a message not only of God's sovereignty over the people, but a God's grace. God has not deserted His people, but simply let them be ruled by the Babylonians as punishment for their disobedience. Now, beaten and downtrodden, God gives His prophet a new message—one of hope and grace that heretofore has not been heard among the people. God will restore His people not because they have done something to deserve restoration or because of the sacrifices they have made in the temple—after all, the temple has been destroyed and there is no place for them to offer sacrifices—but simply because God, in His infinite power and wisdom, has granted His people salvation and restoration. What will come for the Hebrew people is a triumphal return to the Holy City of Jerusalem, and in due time, the rebuilding of the temple and the return to the Promised Land and with that, a return to the Lord's favor.

Isaiah gives his people a new image of their God. No longer is the image of God solely limited to one of power and vengeance. Now, God also has a "kinder and gentler" side. God appears before His people as a good shepherd, leading His flock back to a better place, to greener pastures. It is an image of tenderness and care, an image with which the Chosen People are not very familiar. It is a sign to the people that God can—and will—do something new and unexpected, and the word of God can be trusted.

Now, let us advance about five centuries and return to John the Baptist. The people are again under occupation by a foreign force—Rome—and they also become less obedient to God's will. Sacrifices in the temple are commonplace, yet they are not what God really wants from His people. God wants true repentance and change in the lives of His people. God wants His people to be obedient to His will and His ways, and not to the secular ways under the Roman Empire. In order to get this message through to His people, John the Baptist is sent into the world, coming from the wilderness, to bring a call to repentance and preparation for the One who is to come, one far greater than John could even imagine.

John's message was simple. Prepare the way of the Lord, just as the way was prepared by the Lord for the people to return from exile. Turn away from a life of sin and disobedience. Repent for sins, and be baptized—ritually washed—as a sign of forgiveness of those sins. Then, go forward in a life of obedience to God and to God's will properly prepared to receive the Anointed One of God, whom God had long promised to His people.

As we explore the gospel of Mark, even Jesus has a focus on repentance of the people and forgiveness by God. It is not until the eighth chapter of Mark that we see Jesus resigned to the fact that the people will not repent and turn towards God that he begins to speak of his death as the only way to save God's people.

My dear sisters and brothers, in this Advent season, we not only prepare to celebrate the anniversary of the Incarnation of God through the birth of Jesus, but also for that day to come when Christ returns in all of his power and majesty to judge both the living and the dead. We have been called by the prophet Isaiah and our dear friend John the Baptist to not only turn back to our Lord and repent our sinful ways, but to remember the grace, compassion, and yes, the sovereignty of the One to come, the Anointed One, God's only Son, and through Christ, the grace, compassion, love, and sovereignty of God Almighty.

God has given us the greatest gift in the world—grace, freely given and wholly undeserved. In baptism, we are received into the family of God's

Chosen People, and our sins are washed away as the Old Adam in us is destroyed and we are reborn as the children of God and brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. We spend this and every Advent season not only preparing to receive the infant Jesus into our midst, but more especially preparing to receive Christ the King when he comes again, just as has been promised to us.

There is no hope in the world without Christ Jesus. All that we have rests in the hope of the promise of the Resurrection and the coming of Jesus Christ. And that, my dear friends, is what it is all about.