

God Prepares You For His Coming 2) With His Messengers

Mark 1:1-8 • 2020-12-06 • Advent Series: God Prepares You for His Coming



This year has been a tough one for people in the West. Hundreds of thousands of people have had to evacuate due to wildfire dangers in our country. Some states have had the largest fires in their recorded history. The amount of land consumed by fire is double what it was last year. Could you imagine having the task given to law enforcement and firefighters during one of the mandatory fire evacuations? When there is immediate danger to homes and lives an evacuation warning is given so that the people can escape in time. Notifications are sent out by phone and on official news outlets. But in order to make sure that everyone gets the message and gets out there needs to be a door-to-door effort too. So, law enforcement must go door-to-door in the evacuation areas to make sure everyone gets the message. Often, they will even go beyond the call of duty and help those who need assistance. They might advise the safest route of escape or assist those without transportation. That has to be a tough job!

This Advent season we are considering how God gets us ready for his coming. At his coming there will be more than fire. The earth will burn and be destroyed as he comes to judge all people. We read earlier in our service this morning from the apostle Peter's letter, *"That day (when the Lord comes) will cause the heavens to be set on fire and destroyed, and the elements to melt as they burn with great heat."* (2 Peter 3) We need more than an evacuation order! We need a way to escape his coming wrath and the fires of hell. So, how are we prepared? Today we are looking at the start of the gospel of Mark. And we see how God prepares us for his coming with his messengers.

John was by no means the first messenger God sent to prepare the world for his coming. God had long planned out his coming to this world. He sent his prophets for ages. He spoke of his coming at the beginning of time and repeated it to all the world many times. God had even prepared an entire nation of people, called Israel, to get the world ready for his coming. Around 700 years before John came, the people of Israel received the prophecy which we read earlier. *"This is how it is written in the prophet Isaiah: Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare the way for you. A voice of one calling out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.'"* John was no odd-ball preacher doing his own thing. He was sent by God as the fulfillment of Scripture. John was God's way of preparing everyone for his coming.

John had to do far more than call the people to evacuate before an oncoming fire. He was calling everyone to repentance. That has never been a popular idea. A while back an NFL player was suspended for violent behavior. He had shoved another player's head to the ground three times and then kicked him as he left. You may or may not also have heard his public apology. *"I'm sorry to only my true fans and teammates for putting myself into a position to be misinterpreted."* How's that for a repentant confession?

Repentance goes much further than admitting fault in a wrong. Repentance includes recognition of what is evil and against God. But who likes to admit that they have done wrong against God? Look at the first sin. Adam had refused to take the blame. Eve didn't want to acknowledge any fault. Neither do the children of Adam and Eve like to admit guilt and wrongs. The law of God stands before us and exposes all our evils. It makes clear the many times we have done wrong and turned against our God. But since we are just like Adam we cringe at the idea of admitting guilt to God. We have enough trouble admitting our guilt to each other. But guilt before a holy God?

Not only are we guilty but we must acknowledge with Scripture, *"Our God is a consuming fire."* (Heb 12:29) He comes in holy wrath against every sinner. Some people try to downplay the need for fire evacuations. Some will remain home even in the face of danger. They defy evacuation orders. And they may escape the fire and it may miss them. But it is not so with God's wrath over this world. We can't begin to think John's work was unnecessary or trivial in nature. Nor can we begin to think that his work and message only applied to the people in his day. If one is going to enjoy Christmas and enjoy celebrating Christ's coming, sin must be dealt with. Christ's first and second comings are nothing to get excited about if our sin is not dealt with. Our worship on Christmas becomes only an empty tradition if it does not address the problem of our sin.

Sin, you see, separates us from God. By nature, we are unable to mend that separation. Families will cancel their Christmas celebration if someone in their family offends them or slights them in some way. Friends will tear apart when one person lets another down. Even close families will cancel their Christmas plans if someone in the family is sick and there's a chance that the illness might spread. How ought to God treat his plans? Shouldn't he have the right to cancel all the Christmas celebrations since we have offended him and bring the ugly sin to the party? Doesn't God have the right to say, *"I am not coming unless it is to clean up this mess of a world and do away with its wickedness?"* And just think of where that would leave us!

But God does come. And he does come to deal with sin. But it is not in the way that this world might expect. Mark's gospel helps us see the working of God in grace. The first thing recorded in the gospel of Jesus Christ according to Mark is God preparing his people. God in his grace sends his messengers to prepare his people. This is what we read

earlier from Peter's letter: "*He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*" He doesn't cancel Christmas; he doesn't cancel the preparations for it either. He makes preparations by sending his messengers to us.

God sends his messengers to call people to repentance so that they might live in his forgiveness. That was the power behind John's work. It wasn't that he was an impressive person. His breath was locust and wild honey. His clothes were not hip. He dressed worse than we do after a week of hard-core camping without showers. His church didn't have the most visible location. His building wasn't easy to bring the kids along with a day-care and cry room. He didn't have nice facilities and padded pews. That is because John came to show where the real power lies: God's forgiveness of sins, shared through preaching the Word and in baptizing.

And John's preaching and baptizing centered on Jesus. This is what Mark records: *this is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus the Son of God*. What good is preaching, what good is repentance, what good is baptism if not for Jesus? He is the Son of God. And though true God from eternity he came to this world. John prepared hearts for his coming by preaching about sin and the need for forgiveness. Hearts were prepared as they looked to Jesus for rescue. Jesus is the reason one can turn in repentance for forgiveness. Jesus is the one we are connected to in our baptism. Jesus takes our sin. Forgiveness of sins is possible because God takes our sin off us and places it all on Jesus. And Jesus willingly became the one titled by John as the Lamb of God. Like a sacrificial lamb Jesus offered up himself in our place, in the place of all—so that all can freely be forgiven by grace.

God in his grace still sends his messengers to prepare his people. After John, the task of preaching and baptizing was passed on to Jesus' disciples and to his church. He sent them as his messengers to all the world. John mentioned how Jesus would send the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. On that single day by God's working 3000 souls were baptized and 3000 believers were added to the number of those ready for Christ's coming. And though the world still does not deserve him to come, he still comes in grace. He has prepared so many hearts for his coming by his messengers call to repent and be baptized. God is still patient and not wanting anyone to perish, but to come to repentance.

Today's messengers are sent by God to prepare this world for his coming. They have the same power John had. They don't have anything powerful of their own. It doesn't matter if they are in the inner-city store front or the old country church—the power for preparation is divine. The power to prepare is found in Word and sacrament. This is what we also read about last week regarding baptism, which now saves us. It saves us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It saves us by the pledge of a good conscience before our God. It makes us washed and ready in repentance and in faith. It makes us what we are not by nature: children of God, ready and eager for his coming.

The people came from everywhere to hear the preaching of John and to be baptized. They listened to a man sent by God. Listen to God's messengers in your life. Children, your parents share the good news of Jesus' coming in grace to forgive your wrongs. Your parents brought you to your God for forgiveness and cleansing. You have been born again. Listen also to your Christian teachers and others who share God's Word with you, here and at home. All of you, consider those whom God has given you to hear his Word. It is Jesus who gave some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers to prepare this world for his coming. Listen to the faithful teachers and preachers around you who prepare you for his coming by preaching repentance for forgiveness of sins.

And if they call you to repentance, thank God! Don't consider if repentance is an option, or the "in-thing-to-do." Don't consider if it is the convenient thing to do. Consider the message; consider the washing that God gives in baptism. Know that God still sends you messengers to prepare you for his coming.

Could you imagine if a law enforcement officer or firefighter came urging someone to abandon a city that was about to be burned to the ground? Could you picture that person saying, "I don't believe you. I want to talk to another police officer who won't make me leave." Even if they did find a lying police officer, it wouldn't make them any safer. The danger would still remain. If you have a Christian friend, teacher, pastor, mentor, family member who has called you to repentance, don't fight back. You might win against them for a day. But you cannot win against the one who sent them into your life. God sent them to get you ready for his coming. He sent them to call you to repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

You see, it is never about the messenger. It wasn't then and it isn't now. It is about getting ready for Jesus' coming. John was there to point to one far greater. John was there to preach a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John was there to tell about the coming Christ Jesus. He was there to prepare everyone by preparing their hearts. John wasn't out in the wilderness in order to drag the sinner through the dirt. He was there to pour God's grace over all who would listen, repent, and be baptized. He was sent because God is gracious and calls to repentance that he may also forgive for Jesus' sake. Our God is coming. He prepares you for his coming. With his messengers he calls.