

December 7, 2014
Advent 2

"Let the Voice of John the Baptist Bring You Close to Jesus"

MARK 1:1-8

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" ³ "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" ⁴ And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Aren't you impressed? Aren't you impressed by the large crowds of people who left their homes in the Judean hills and Jerusalem and traveled for miles into the Jordan Valley to hear John the Baptist preach? They did not travel in buses or cars or even by horseback, donkeys or camels. Most of them walked perhaps even twenty or thirty miles. They wanted to hear John the Baptist speak about the good news of the kingdom of God. They wanted to hear him speak about the King so great that John said he was not worthy to stoop down and untie his sandals.

Aren't you impressed? Aren't you impressed once again this Christmas season by all the people around the world who will journey in faith to a manger in Bethlehem and worship a tiny baby as their Lord and God? Amid all the superficial celebrations of Christmas, people are still making their way to Bethlehem to worship Jesus as the Word made flesh.

John the Baptist wanted people to get close to Jesus. That's what I want in my life more than anything else. I want to get closer to Jesus my Savior. Let's listen to the voice of John the Baptist and let that voice call us to repentance and bring us closer to Jesus.

The voice of John the Baptist calls us to repentance

Follow the crowds of people from Jerusalem to the banks of the Jordan River. Sit down with them and listen to John the Baptist as he calls for repentance. This is the voice of a man whose coming into the world was predicted by the Old Testament prophets. "It is written in Isaiah the prophet: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way'- voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" It was actually the prophet Malachi who predicted that a messenger would come from the Lord to prepare the way for the Messiah. It was Isaiah who predicted a voice crying out in the wilderness. This amazing voice cried out to the people and called on them to get ready for the Messiah to come.

I need the voice of John the Baptist to tell me to be prepared for the coming of Jesus not just in Bethlehem but in judgment on the last days. I don't want to be caught unprepared as happened to our country over 70 years ago when Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Japanese. Seventy three years ago on Sunday morning, December 7th, the Japanese attacked our country and totally

caught us by surprise. Our reading for today from 2 Peter 3 warns us, "The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare."

How do we prepare for Jesus to come again in glory? One way to prepare is to listen to the voice of John the Baptist. He says, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him." John warned people about the judgment that was coming. He wanted them to confess their sins before God and then receive forgiveness. It says in verse 5, "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River."

John said that Jesus was coming with his winnowing fork in his hand and he would separate the wheat from the chaff and burn the chaff in unquenchable fire. When pompous Pharisees and snooty Sadducees came to the Jordan Valley to check out John's preaching, he told them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath." Even Roman soldiers joined the crowds and John told them to stop extorting money, and accusing people falsely and to be content with their wages. People confessed their sins because they were afraid.

A well known Bible teacher who lived about a hundred years ago once said, "Take away the aroused conscience and you might just as well turn the churches into dancing halls." The same could be said of the celebration of Christmas. Take away the aroused consciences of people and they will no longer celebrate the gift of God's Son that comes to save them. They will no longer worry about the judgment to come or where they stand with God or the sins that are increasing and multiplying in their lives. Arouse the consciences of people. Show them how far they fall short of God's glory. Point them to reality of judgment day coming tomorrow and they will cry out, "I have sinned against God. I need a Savior to rescue me and save me." Then they will cling desperately to the message of the angels on the night of Jesus' birth, "Unto you is born this day a Savior which is Christ the Lord."

This season of Advent is a time for personal reflection. Where have I allowed sinful thoughts to enter into my life? Where have I actually nurtured and encourage sins of greed and pride and selfishness or uncharitable thoughts in my life? I can bemoan how bad things are going in the world. I can bemoan Christmas decorations and cards and songs that have nothing to do with Jesus. I need to reflect on what is going on in my personal life and inside of me. With genuine concern and sorrow I say to myself, "Holy and merciful Father, I confess that I am by nature sinful, and that I have disobeyed you in my thoughts, words and actions. I have done what is evil and failed to do what is good. For this I deserve your punishment both now and in eternity. But I am truly sorry for my sins, and trusting in Savior Jesus Christ, I pray: Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner."

The people came to John in large numbers confessing their sins. John did not send them home without a message of hope. The voice of John the Baptist joyfully talked to the people about Jesus.

The voice of John the Baptist tells us about Jesus

We are told, "And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John talked to people about the forgiveness of sins. He proclaimed to them that their sins were forgiven through the Messiah who was to come. When Jesus came to John on the banks of the Jordan River, John pointed the world to Jesus with the well known words, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Oh, dear Christian, look at the eyes of John sparkle as he talks about Jesus. He says, "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." There are lots of wonderful things we could say about John the Baptist. He was miraculously conceived because his parents were too old to have children. He was a second cousin of Jesus. He was filled with the Holy Spirit even in the womb of his mother Elizabeth. His coming was predicted by the prophets. Jesus said of him that "He's the greatest man that every lived up until his time." What truly distinguishes John the Baptist was his unrelenting zeal and desire and yearning to point people to Jesus. When people fawned all over John, he humbly said of Jesus, "He must increase and I must decrease."

John the Baptist wore strange clothes and ate food that is certainly strange for us. "John wore clothing made of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey." Here is a man who lives out in the desert. He wears clothes made from camel's hair to keep himself warm at night. He eats off the land, feeding on locusts and wild honey. See him roast the locusts and pop them into his mouth. See him cherish the sweetness of the wild honey. There are no fancy clothes for John the Baptist. There are no Brioni suits or Gucci shoes. No fancy home and no fancy cars. And no \$500 a night suite as one television evangelist requires when he comes to town for his healing crusade. John the Baptist is totally caught up with telling people about Jesus. He wants the people to know they have complete pardon and forgiveness for every sin they every committed in this Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Philips Brooks was a much loved pastor in Washington, DC. He is the person who wrote the popular Christmas hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." After he died the people erected a stature in his honor showing Philips Brooks standing up, looking off into the distance, and pointing his finger in the air. This was their way of honoring a man who loved to point them to Jesus.

What do I want more than anything else this Christmas? I want this time of year to bring me closer to Jesus. I want to appreciate even more fully the words of John the Baptist that said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

I want to close this sermon today by reading to from a sermon Martin Luther preached on the words of John the Baptist that pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God. These words have always brought much comfort and peace to me and that is why I am sharing them with you.

"It is extremely important that we know where our sins have been disposed of. The Law deposits them on our conscience and shoves them into our bosom. But God takes them from us and places them on the shoulders of the Lamb. If sin rested on me and on the world, we would be lost; for it is too strong and burdensome. God says: "I know that your sin is unbearable for you; therefore behold, I will lay it upon My Lamb and relieve you of it. Believe this! If you do, you are delivered of sin." There are only two abodes for sin: it either resides with you, weighing you down; or it lies on Christ, the Lamb of God. If it is loaded on your back, you are lost: but if it rests on Christ, you are free and saved."

December 7, 2014. If the world comes to an end today, dear Christian, you know where your sins rest, not on you but on the Lamb of God. What a blessing the voice of John the Baptist is for us and for the whole world. Amen.