

Prepare The Way Mark 1:1-8

His name was John. People knew him locally as the Baptist. Some said he was a religious eccentric. Others less kind called him a flake. He was definitely not the kind of person you'd pick to usher in the news of the Messiah's coming. He didn't fit well with shepherds and wise men.

Yet, here he was, God's unlikely servant, chosen to herald the spectacular events that soon would follow. A most unlikely prophet, to be sure, but God's prophet nevertheless.

From the get-go everything about John was unique. His mother Elizabeth was related to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary was a young girl, indeed almost a child. Most scholars believe she was thirteen.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, was a woman in the golden years of her life. You'd see her more as a great grandmother than mother. Yet, she and her aging priest of a husband were pregnant.

And then there was John himself. Being the same age as Jesus they grew up together, played together, yet in adulthood were so very different from each other.

When John began his ministry he lived in the desert solitude of Judea, a rugged desert wilderness. He ate honey and wild locust and dressed in camel hair. He poured over the scriptures, especially the prophetic ministry of Elijah, after whom he modeled his own ministry.

And John didn't give a second thought to a person's privilege or rank. For that reason the upper class rejected both he and his message. You can read about that in Luke 7:29.

Yet, John gathered a respectable following. He attracted many hearers among the lower class, many of whom received baptism by his hands. John even drew a group of disciples around him, which is significant for two reasons.

First, some of these disciples later became disciples of Jesus. Second, a number of people began to think of John himself as the long expected Messiah.

For that reason John's gospel felt obliged to specifically point out "There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came for testimony to bear witness to the light that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but he came to bear witness to the light."

What drew people to John and his message? Well, John was far-fetched, intriguing. And his austere life style was a compelling reason to listen to him. But there was more to John. John knew that God was about to do something that would shake the foundations of the earth and he understood his role in preparing the world for that event. He did this in basically three ways:

First, **John prepared the way by living a godly life.** In an age of corruption John was a clean, fresh breath of mountain air. In his passionate embrace of goodness he spoke out fearlessly against every form of corruption.

When religious leaders from Jerusalem appeared in his congregation he didn't express delight to see them or feel complimented that they had come to hear him preach.

No. His devotion to his calling was uncompromising and complete. And the impact of his godliness prepared the way for Jesus.

The world has no answer to the godly life. It only tries to discover its source and find its secret, then imitate it, and hope others will come to know it themselves. That's how John prepared. He lived a godly life. Is that what God is doing in your life this Advent, preparing the way in this world this Advent through the influence of your life?

Secondly, **John prepared the way by challenging the people's sins.** One of the towering marks of this age is the absence of guilt. Not many people would deny that fact. Some are pleased that guilt has been dethroned; others see it as a bad sign.

The absence of guilt in today's world makes it very hard to talk about sin and our need for repentance. Because if we don't feel guilt, then the need for repentance is greatly minimized, if not eliminated altogether.

And for many the word repentance is a word that belongs to yesterday. We pair it with sackcloth and ashes and mourners benches. Some see repentance as something that we do only when we get caught.

But repentance is far more than simply spitting out "I'm Sorry" if we get caught cheating the IRS or in our spouse. And repentance is more than simply turning over a new leaf. Repentance means turning around and walking the other way.

What John wanted people to do was to turn away from sin and turn toward the soon to arrive Messiah. He wanted people to see that repentance is not negative or down faced. But rather that it looks up and looks forward, and breaks the chains of oppression and death that bind.

Don't get stuck in the notion that repentance means feeling sorry and miserable. Repentance means you've stopped doing what's wrong and you've started doing what's right. And it means one more thing - true repentance means a willingness to confront sin.

John the Baptist had this courage to challenge sin wherever he met it. King Herod had seduced his brother's wife and taken her to live with him. Although the people were outraged, the religious leaders were silent, tread carefully, and were fearful of Herod's violence and brutality.

But this wild preacher put his own safety aside and kept his eyes on God. With outspoken courage he denounced the king, who then had him arrested and eventually killed.

There is so much wrong with the world: broken homes, the increase in violence and dishonesty, the lack of integrity in public life, the slow slide of the church adopting the ways of the world, the decay of morality.

Who will call us back to God in repentance? Who will have eyes only for the Lord and not seek the approval of the crowds?

This morning we salute John who prepared the way of the Lord by challenging the people's sins, who was not after the popular vote, and who only had eyes for God. Are we ready to share his work and mission?

Last point, **John the Baptist prepared the way by pointing to Christ.** John in the desert was in the great tradition of the Hebrew prophets. He was aware that time was running out and had no desire to waste time on peripheral matters.

Superficial gawkers came from Jerusalem to see him, intrigued by this strange phenomenon of a wild man preaching repentance. Frivolous things like his clothing, his diet, his fierce declamatory oratory fascinated them.

They wanted to interview him and then tell all their friends about their remarkable experience.

- “Who are you?” they asked. His answer was curt: “I am not the Christ.”
- “Are you Elijah?” “No!”
- “Who are you?” they persisted. John’s answer ought to be ours: “I am a voice.”

I am a voice. It was John’s crowning glory that he recognized something that others had not. True, others had anticipated that God would intervene in the world. Others had predicted that the Messiah would come as the head of a conquering army, the Lion of Judah to the fight!

But this wild man from the wilderness saw the heart of a nation and sensed the mind of His God. And his insight caused him to cry out, “Behold”, as he watched his cousin Jesus approach the river.

“Behold... .not the Lion who will conquer and destroy... behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

This Advent we prepare the way of the Lord by living a godly life, challenging the people’s sins, and pointing to the Christ. Amen.