**Mark 1:1-8** December 6, 2020

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Advent 3

*Mark 1:1 The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

*2It is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way—3a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” 4And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5The 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. 6John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7And 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. 8I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**The Voice Calling in the Desert**

The movie theater is dark. For this debut, the theater has shut off all the lights. They even got permission from the fire marshal to turn off those annoying exit lights for a few minutes. The darkness is complete. You can, however, tell that the projector is running. While darkness blinds you, there is a sound. It is the sound of a gentle wind in a lonely place.

What you are hearing but not seeing is the beginning of the Gospel of Mark. Mark hearkens us to the whispers of the Holy Spirit, persistent whispers through a long-dead prophet, whispers that stand forever. While the wind in a lonely place blows, we begin to see something on the screen. We see dimly misty battle scenes. In the seven hundred years since the prophet spoke, armies of nation after nation have washed across the land, the land of Palestine. In Isaiah’s day, the sons of David sat on their throne. A century later the ruthless Babylonians annihilated them. The Spirit whispered on. After Babylon came the Persians. When their moment was over, no less a person walked the land than the world changer, Alexander the Great. He walked the city of Jerusalem, rumor is that he even entered the temple courts, yet almost the day he died that great man’s empire fell to pieces. Then the Ptolemies ruled the prophet’s land, then the Seleucids, then the Hasmoneans. (Hey, if you are thinking, “I’ve never heard of these guys,” that’s the point.) Finally the fierce Romans set the standard of their imperial eagle over the land. Lasting longer than the others, their rule, too, would crumble to dust. Through the rise and fall of the tides of history, through all human attempts to establish meaning on this earth, the Holy Spirit’s whisper continued, ***“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.”*** For those who believed, it was hope. For those who did not, it was maddening. How could this mere whisper, persist?

Jesus is a story different from all the other stories that have ever been told. By story, I don’t mean the fables of Aesop or the Brothers’ Grimm or the Marvel Universe. I mean the stories of nations and empires, people great and people small. The story of Jesus is not a story of the rise and fall of any empire or thought. His story is the divine constant that stretches through time, from before the very beginning when we were but two, to the very end when all of this will be rolled up like a blanket at the arrival of spring. His story will endure after the entirety of this universe has been revealed to be no more than dewdrops on a spiderweb, dewdrops vanishing at the first touch of sunlight.

So it is that the Gospel of Mark begins, hearkening into the distant past. Its implications reach into the infinite future, through a prophetic whisper.

Now on the screen we see something more definite. We see a man, a single man. He has no army, no palace, hardly any clothes. We aren’t told of his followers because the part of that man that matters isn’t his followers, but a message not his own which the Spirit of the Lord put into his mouth. But before we see him clearly, we hear him: ***“Prepare the way!”*** Mark tells us he is getting the way ready for the One standing off-stage, stage left. The One waits for a time of His choosing to enter human history. Meanwhile the solitary man, the preparer, urges people to get ready. Even the preparer seems not to know all that much about the One coming after him. There is one thing this preparer knows: ***“After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.”*** The messenger is quite certain that the One coming after him is so great that the messenger himself who has given up everything—taking only enough of the roughest clothing so that he can appear in public without shame; giving up even the convenience of a table to sit and eat at with friends and colleagues, or even by himself, eating only what God provides in nature; living for the One coming after him to an extent none of us, you or I, has done for our Lord and Savior—this messenger who speaks the words of the Holy Spirit himself, who lives a life of total devotion, he knows he is still unworthy of being this Coming One’s servant.

Oh, if that is so with this voice in the desert, then what of us? If the One coming is so much greater than John, then how much smaller must we be? And so the preparer, John the Baptist, urges us to do what he has already done, ***“Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.”***

This is how the Gospel of Mark begins. For our purposes, it is good to pause at this point. If you have been with us for a while, you know that our church’s Sunday readings are in a three year cycle. For each Sunday of those three years, a Gospel reading is always the centerpiece.

Last church year we read from the Gospel of Matthew. Next church year we will read from Luke. This church year, we will be reading from Mark (with a few readings from John in the mix). Each of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John has a slightly different emphasis because each was written for a different original audience.

The Gospel of Mark *is* different. When you think about today’s reading and reflect on the fact that it is the ***“beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God,”*** you are struck by the fact that even though it is the “beginning,” the Christmas story is completely missing. Here in the beginning of Mark we are not told of an angel speaking gently to an expectant Mary, nor of Joseph being urged to conquer his doubts and wed a woman who is inexplicably expecting. We are not told of a baby in a manger, shepherds in fields, nor Wise Men from afar. None of those warm and contemplative pictures begin the gospel of Mark.

In Mark, we break from the starting gate like a racehorse. John the Baptist and Jesus first appear as full-grown men. John the Baptist preaches and baptizes, Jesus is baptized, goes into the desert to be tempted, calls his first disciples, and encounters and defeats an evil spirit, all on the first page. Mark was speaking to an audience of, most likely Romans, a pragmatic, practical people. Mark focuses on the actions and power of Jesus rather than his teachings. Mark gets down to brass tacks, and puts the evidence on the table for the Son of God.

But for one paragraph, the eight verses of our reading, before getting to that energetic message, Mark lets John the Baptist tell us something. People who want to encounter Jesus need to be prepared for Jesus. And the way we are prepared, says the Baptist, is through repentance.

Those words are as rough as John’s camel hair clothing. Repent means some ugly things. It means admitting we are wrong, have made critical mistakes, been rebellious and disrespectful of God’s will with no justification. It means throwing ourselves on God’s mercy because we can’t do anything to make ourselves right.

This man and his message make us uncomfortable. They make us defensive. Hearing it we snap, “Me? Repent? Who do you think you are? I’m not the guy with crazy hair, crazy clothes, and crazy food. If someone here doesn’t have their act together here, I’d say it’s you, John!” Yes, that is what we do, isn’t it? If someone tells us something we don’t like, we find ways to mentally dismiss them. Maybe they are not attractive, or too attractive. Maybe they are too proud, or too wimpy. Maybe too smelly or too rich. We do that with people who say things we don’t like. When someone tells me, “Repent!” I can put money on it that I am going to find a hundred reasons that that person does not deserve to be listened to. But “Repent” was the message of the persistent voice in the desert, once whispering, now shouting, ***“Prepare the way for the Lord; make straight paths for him.”***

***“In the desert…”*** The desert was God’s chosen place for this encounter. And a desert-like place is best for us too. I won’t go through the many, many desert encounters in the Bible. But I would like to bring up one desert encounter that explains God’s choice of the desert. Listen to this love poem from the Old Testament: *“I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown”* (Jeremiah 2:2). What a tender memory of two souls proclaimed to be one at the altar, but who grew to become one through their first days in a harsh frontier. What better place to weld two souls together than in the desert, where each must rest and rely on the other. That poem was God speaking of Israel as they went to Mount Sinai in the time of Moses. There Israel was wed to the Lord God. There in the desert Israel learned who the Lord really is: the holy and just God who is also the good and gracious God.

And when Jesus was about to enter human history to make a new covenant with God’s people, John appeared in the desert so that people could again encounter God in the desert. The city, the markets, the thousands of diversions, the entertainment, the restaurants and everything else was left behind, and it was just them and God. In the desert they realized as John preached, that they needed to repent before the promised one came. They repented, not because John the Baptist shouted at them, “Repent!” But because when all the distractions were gone, when the cell phones were put down and shut off and their batteries dead, God finally had their attention. They finally could see what they really looked like before God, and it wasn’t pretty. Their sins were many. Like the Israelites of old in the desert, they had often sinned. They had loved what God hated. They had pursued their pleasures instead of his. They had created diversions, yes, even there in the desert, so that they could ignore God. Yes, John’s preaching touched their hearts. They repented.

And the preacher kept on preaching. But now the wind was no longer whispering a message of unworthiness, but a joyful message of forgiveness. All the things that they felt ashamed of and regretted, were forgiven by God. Not forgiven like we like to imagine forgiveness—just vanishing like a puff of smoke. Forgiveness doesn’t work like that. You know that when you forgive a debt, it merely means that someone else has to pay. Well, forgiveness of sins is the same. The guilt of sin does not just magically disappear. Someone has to pay. The Great One who was coming, whose footstep was at the door in John’s day, whose coming we celebrate on the 25th of this month, this stronger one has shouldered the debt of our forgiveness.

To those people John preached ***“a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”*** They had felt the sorrow of their sin, knew their unworthiness before God, but now as the water of baptism rolled over their bodies, they felt those sins wash off of them. Now they were ready, we are ready. We were ready to meet him like John the Baptist, forgiven and admitting: ***“One will come… the [straps] of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie”*** and yet who accepts me.

Most of you, maybe all of you, have been washed in those baptismal waters. Thank God! God has claimed you. Yet it is right that even we who have been adopted by God through faith, should ever strive to prepare the way for the Lord, to do the road maintenance in our own hearts through daily repentance. Then we are ready to meet our Lord, under the banner of his undeserved love. Amen.