

The Second Sunday in Advent. The scripture text is taken from Mark 1:1-8

As the old saying goes, “When you don’t know where to start, start at the beginning”. That is what the writer of Mark’s Gospel does. He begins his gospel at the beginning.

The writer of Mark’s Gospel tell us in chapter 1 verse 1: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

It is the beginning of his gospel. But it all didn’t begin here. In the beginning of creation, as Adam and Eve sinned, God was already speaking of the coming of the One who would crush the head of the serpent.

Then, in the Old Testament prophets, God spoke again concerning the One who would come as the forerunner; one like Elijah: That is, John the Baptist. Listen to verses 2 and 3. “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, ‘See I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’ “

So, as Mark’s Gospel opens, we find that the stage is almost set for Jesus’ ministry to begin. John the Baptist is on the scene.

He was there to prepare the way so that the people would be ready to receive the King. He was a voice crying in the wilderness.

He was God’s bulldozer, sent to build a highway to God; to level the hills, raise the valleys, straighten the crooked ways, and smooth the rough places. His message would be the road on which the Lord would ride.

When we find John the Baptist, we find him in the wilderness. It was not that John couldn’t find a place to preach in the city.

Rather, God had sent him to preach in the wilderness. I find this interesting. You see, this is not the wisdom of the world.

Some would say that this was not the wisest move, at least, if you were looking at it from a marketing point of view.

I mean, how many people could you draw out into the wilderness on any given day? Surely the city would be a better place to begin with.

But the wisdom of God is wiser than the wisdom of man. Not only did the people come, they came in droves.

But this raises, another interesting question: “Why did they come?” They (the people) came because of the message that was being preached.

We want to focus on the message, which John preached. Let’s turn our attention to two aspects of this message: its allure and its authority.

There is no doubt, that when the people came to hear John the Baptist preach, his message had a deep appeal to them.

They willingly made the trek from the surrounding countryside to hear this strange preacher. Strange indeed. John the Baptist did not live like other men.

The Bible teaches us that he clothed himself in a garment of camel's hair and that he ate locusts and wild honey.

No doubt, some folks came in curiosity, but others were moved by the strange allure of his message.

The people who came to hear John the Baptist preach, were moved for several reasons. The people were attracted to John's message, because John spoke about a universal need.

Deep within us, there is a realization of our sin. While many like to deny the reality of sin, it is still there and it will be there until the day we die.

People only intellectually deny it. In their hearts they feel the burden of it, and it presses in on them. The knowledge of our imperfections (our sin) is inescapable.

And who hasn't felt the sting of conscience at impure thoughts, motives, and wrong actions? Along with the knowledge of our sin, comes the accompanying guilt of our sin.

Our souls are equipped with a conscience. As we sin, we cut a wound in our conscience and we feel its pain.

We feel the pain and the guilt, we feel the weight of our sin. The sad thing is, many in our culture today, are driven to the psychiatrist's office in an attempt to alleviate this burden.

Many are told, that there is no reason to feel guilty. After all, it's not a matter of right and wrong, there are no absolutes. What's right for you, is right for you. What's right for me, is right for me.

I have to laugh about this, but the pop-psychologists, profess, that if one would hear, that the real problem is the feelings of guilt, that one experiences, then perhaps if you can go back and see just what it was, in your past, that made you that way, you can quit feeling guilty.

As a result, many in our day fix the blame on someone else for their behavior. Now, while there may have been someone else involved, the fact remains that you are still responsible for your behavior before God. That means you and only you, no one else.

And the reason why you feel guilty, generally, is because you are guilty. But guilt is a heavy burden. That is the reason why, people will do almost anything to rid themselves of it.

And so, man, sinful and guilty, faces the future with fear. Fear comes from feeling powerless in the face of reality.

When we have faced the reality that we are sinful and unable to do anything about it, we are fearful of what the future holds, of how we will handle it; of what others will think, and of what God thinks.

In the midst of all this, we desperately desire freedom, to be free from this heavy weight of guilt. Think about this, think back to a time in your life, when you felt so weighed down by guilt, because of something you may have said or done. This is torment.

And this torment is not just limited just limited to those who are the “have-nots”. Some people have all they want in this life and then some, and they are still not satisfied. They are full of sin and empty without God.

That is why material things do not satisfy. These people are described as “having everything they have ever wanted, but not wanting what they had.” They are dissatisfied because they are empty.

This was in John the Baptist’s Day. And this is in our day. The people of John the Baptist’s day, had a desire to be free, not only free of Rome, but to be free in spirit. For that reward, no price would be too high.

So they came, and came and came. Out into the hot, dusty, and parched desert, they came. John the Baptist’s message drew them because it spoke to this universal need.

Others may skirt around the issue of sin, but John the Baptist was dealing with it openly. And they wanted to hear what he had to say.

So they came to this desert place, hoping to hear something that would set them free. Often times, we will find that in the desert of our lives, we will find the living water.

Not only did John’s message speak to a universal need, but John’s message also offered hope. The word was out. People were finding relief. This wild man of the wilderness was preaching to those who would listen, and baptizing those who wanted to get their lives right with God. So they came.

I believe that all of us, are attracted by a message of hope. You see, John the Baptist, did not preach condemnation. Some have characterized John the Baptist as harsh, blunt, and unloving because he spoke the truth with no apology.

Did you know it is not unloving, to tell the truth. You can tell the truth in an unloving way. But the truth itself, is not unloving.

It would have been unloving for John the Baptist to do otherwise. But while he told the truth about their sin, he did not condemn the sinner, but rather told the sinner, it’s time to get out of your sin.

John the Baptist preached a word of deliverance. He preached that now the sinner could be free, that the citizen would no longer be a second-class citizen, but a citizen in God’s Kingdom. This was part of the allure of his message.

Not only did John’s message have certain appealing elements which attracted people. But it also had a certain authority.

John the Baptist spoke as one who was telling the truth. John the Baptist’s message was one of repentance. He called the people to turn from their sins, but a change of heart and a change of behavior was required. That is what repentance is all about, turning away from sin, and turning to God.

This is why, on one occasion, he put the Scribes and the Pharisees in their place, for coming to him. He told them to show some evidence of their repentance, because they had shown no sincerity in truly repenting from the heart. They had shown no, “fruit” of repentance.

John the Baptist called them to confess their sins. True repentance begins here. It takes a humble man or woman to confess his or her sins.

There is a great need for true biblical repentance in the Church of Christ today. Repentance is necessary, to maintain that close relationship with Christ.

Repentance, at its essence, means both a change of mind and a change of behavior. It means that we turn from our sinful ways, because we have been convinced by God that they are wrong.

It means that we come before the foot of the cross, humble ourselves before God, that we lay down our pride and bow before Him.

True repentance goes a long way in building a highway for our God. In true repentance, we pull down the mountains of our pride, we raise up the dashed hopes of fulfillment, and we straighten out the crooked and rough places of lives. This is the good news of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God.

When one repents of his or her sin, he or she is forgiven. Many of our problems would be solved, if we only saw and lived by this truth.

Our sins are put away from us by repentance. This is what it means to be forgiven by God. When God forgives us, He puts our sins as far as away from Him as the east is from the west, or the north from the south.

God then plunges our sins into the sea of forgetfulness and remembers them no more. We become free from sin and guilt. We are cleansed by the blood of the Lamb.

Repentance and forgiveness are only the beginning of God's work in our lives. John the Baptist can bring us to God, but only Christ Jesus is the way to God. This is the work of God's Holy Spirit.

That is why we need the One who can baptize with the Holy Spirit. Only as we are filled by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can experience new life in Christ.

The good news is that God has filled us with His Holy Spirit, God's Holy Spirit lives in you and in me. The scriptures tell us: "There is therefore, now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans chapter 8, verse 1)

That is the good news, that by the blood-stained cross, and the empty tomb, of the resurrected and victorious Lord Jesus Christ, that is why we are here, to hear His Word of forgiveness, repenting of our sins, and to receive His precious body and blood, knowing that through faith in Him, our sins are forgiven, our guilt and shame have been removed from us, and that we can live as God's people, by grace, through faith. Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord God, you sent John the Baptist to call the people to repent of their sins and to turn to You, bearing the fruit of repentance. Lord God, open our hearts and minds, so that we may hear the message of the forgiveness of sins and the promise of a new life found through faith in Christ. By the power of your Holy Spirit, help us to turn to you, and to come, to the foot of the cross, in humility, casting aside our pride, repenting of our sins, and receiving your forgiveness, knowing that through faith in Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, we can bear the fruits of repentance. All these things we humbly pray, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

