

Genesis 6:1-22
Second Sunday in Advent
Our Savior Comes
...Let Us Prepare His Way

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church
Winchester, VA
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The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, ² as 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 wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, 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 comes the one more powerful than I, the straps 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.”

Last week, with the beginning of the season of Advent, we entered into a new Church year. Our church calendar is divided into two major sections. In the first half of the year from Advent to Pentecost, our focus is on the time of Christ, as we recall the events of His life, death, resurrection, and ascension. During the second half of the year, following the Festival of Pentecost, we turn our attention to the time of the church, the joyful response of the community of believers to God’s grace in both mission and service.

As we make our way through that calendar we follow a series of biblical texts that have been carefully chosen to help us cover all the main teachings of Scripture. Each Sunday we have a text from one of the four Gospel accounts, from one of the New Testament letters, from the Old Testament, and from the Psalms. The main theme for each Sunday is taken from the Gospel reading and the series of texts that we follow spans three years. In the first year of the cycle which we have just completed, the Gospel selections are taken predominantly from the Gospel of Matthew; this year we’ll be following the Gospel of Mark; and next year the Gospel of Luke. Each year passages from the Gospel of John are inserted as well so that as we complete the three every three years we’ve made our way through all four Gospel accounts.

As we look at Mark’s Gospel this year, one of the first distinctions that we find is that rather than beginning his account with a narrative of the birth of Jesus like Matthew and Luke, he starts instead by showing us Jesus’ credentials. In the first 8 verses of Mark 1 which we’re looking at today, he introduces Jesus to us as the promised Messiah, the Son of God, and he shows us how Jesus’ arrival was announced by the very messenger who was foretold in the Old Testament.

In the next five verses he shows us how Jesus was approved by God the Father and confirmed by the Holy Spirit at His Baptism and how He began the overthrow of Satan, the archenemy of God and man, with his temptation in the wilderness. And that’s all packed into the first third of the first chapter of his account! That same kind of rapid pace continues throughout Mark. It’s easily the shortest of the four Gospel accounts and it seems like Mark’s purpose was

to give a quick survey of the history of Jesus as the Messiah giving particular emphasis to His power as the Son of God.

So where does this action-packed account of our Savior begin? Well, as we heard a few minutes ago, Mark begins by introducing us to a man we know as John the Baptist. He doesn't give us much background on John, he just cuts right to the chase. In the Old Testament God had foretold the coming of a prophet who would prepare the way for the Messiah. "That man is John," Mark tells us, "and here's what he had to say, **After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.**"

Now John may not have seemed like much with his camel-skin garb and his interesting diet of locusts and honey, the people recognized that he wasn't any kind of lord or king, but they went out to see and to hear him anyway. In fact, we're told that **the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.** John may not have seemed like much but he gets one of the highest accolades in Scripture. In Luke 7:28 Jesus says, **I tell you that among those born of women there is no one greater than John.** Jesus had high praise for this messenger, but John didn't have much to say for himself, did he? Just that someone more powerful than he was coming and that he wasn't even fit to untie that man's sandals.

John was preaching repentance. The Messiah was coming, but as we saw last week, that Savior brings both judgment and salvation. "Turn from your sins," was John's message, "repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins." But even as he delivered the message that God had given him, he acknowledged that he was sinful too.

John was an instrument of God, he preached God's Word and he baptized people with water but that was all he was able to do. It wasn't John who sent the Holy Spirit forth into the hearts of the people congregated before him. It wasn't John who grafted people into God's family through Baptism. He was merely a man, and a sinful man at that. But one who was more powerful than him was coming; He was the one who would actively pour His Holy Spirit into the hearts of the people.

Jesus is mightier than John; He is mightier than you and me too. Our Old Testament lesson (Isaiah 40:1-11) reminded us of that: **All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever** (Isaiah 40:6-8).

Just like John and his original audience, you and I have sins of our own to confess. We spend more time concerned about insignificant things like food and clothing and money than we spend considering the living and active message of God's Word. We get oppressed and depressed by the broken world around us and the sinful nature within us. We give in to Satan's temptations with the result that we are completely powerless to stand before God and face His judgment.

But what about this man that Mark wants to tell us about in this Gospel? His name is Jesus, which comes from the Hebrew word *Yeshua*, which means, *He saves*. He was given that name by his adoptive father Joseph because the angel Gabriel had told him that this child would be the one who would save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). Mark also identifies Him with the title Christ or Messiah, which means, *the Anointed One*, telling us that this man is the substitute chosen and sent by God to sacrifice Himself for all who are guilty of sin and then to enter into His glory.

He isn't just a man, though. Mark tells us that this Jesus is the Son of God, come with all His might to rescue us just as Isaiah had foretold, **See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,**

and He rules with a mighty arm.... He tends His flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart (Isaiah 40:10-11).

The season of Advent sets before us a Savior who is true God and true man, sent into our world to rescue us from our sins—a Savior who will come again to gather those who have placed their trust in Him to His side, but to send to eternal punishment those who have rejected Him and His gift of salvation. Through His prophets, men like Isaiah, John the Baptist, and Mark the Evangelist, and people like your parents, your teachers, and your pastors, God is preparing you for the coming of that Savior.

First, He has those prophets set before you the message of His law, revealing that you are not prepared for His coming. You are by no means innocent or blameless before God. As God's prophets set His holy standards before us, we see just how deeply we have fallen and how corrupt our nature is. The call to turn away from our sins fills us with terror and despair as we realize that we are powerless to make ourselves anything other than what we are—sinful human creatures who no longer deserve the love and favor of our Creator God.

That devastating news of God's law puts us exactly where we need to be to hear the message of the Gospel. The first verse of our text this morning said, **The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.** That word Gospel means *good news*. And as we look at that Good News over the course of this coming year we'll see how the promises God gives us in the gospel swallow up the terror and condemnation of the law.

In two weeks, we'll celebrate the birth of our Savior Jesus—the entrance of God's chosen Messiah into our world. A few months later we'll gather to celebrate the most joyous festival of the year, Easter Sunday, as we see our Savior's triumph over sin proclaimed by His victory over death itself.

God has used and continues to use His law and gospel to prepare you for the coming of your Savior, and now He wants to use you too. John the Baptist's mission field was a literal wilderness, the desert region South of the city of Jericho, but the message he preached at God's behest revealed another wilderness, the wilderness of sin that the people were wandering in. God has entrusted that same message to you, to show others how lost they are in their sins. He wants to use you to help others to see that they are like sheep who have gone astray, following after their ways, and that that has led them into a spiritual desert where they cannot survive.

But the heart of John's message wasn't the aimless wanderings of the lost sheep of Israel. No, the heart of His message was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. God has entrusted that message to you too. The only reason this world is still here is because our loving God is allowing time for redeemed sinners like you and me to take that message of salvation to those who need to hear it.

We like to grumble about the Christmas creep—the songs and decorations that seem to be appearing earlier and earlier each year—but isn't it kind of "gimme putt"? Our entire nation is gearing up right now, preparing itself to celebrate Christmas. The ball is already on the edge of the hole, now all we have to do is tap it in. People are talking about and getting excited for Christmas, now all we have to do is give them a nudge in the right direction, letting them know that what Christmas is really about is a Savior who rescues us from the desert of sin, inviting them to come and celebrate with us here, as we worship God and bask in the glorious good news of our Savior.

Our Savior Jesus is coming, so let's make the most of our time, and prepare the way.
Amen.