
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."

"Are you sitting down? I have something important I need to tell you!" "I have some good news and I have some bad news." You have probably heard these phrases or something similar to them, from a family member or a friend, as they prepare you for some big news that they have to share. They want to make sure that they have your full attention because they don't want you to miss what they are about to say.

Today we hear about a messenger sent by God who has a message that is worthy of our full attention. **So get ready! There is something that you need to know!**

Our lesson comes from the opening verses of the Gospel of Mark. And so even before we get into the work of that great forerunner John the Baptist, let's take a moment to see how God would use Mark and the opening words of his gospel to grab our attention. Mark's gospel account stands out for several reasons, including its pace and it's stripped down and to the point approach. Mark emphasizes Jesus as the Savior in word and deed, and Mark seemingly spares no breath (nor ink) in getting to the task at hand. And so the very way his opening words are given seem like they are specifically designed to grab our attention. Like the literary device, "Once upon a time..." but better. His words have a similar effect - get settled in and get ready to listen. but again, this is better than a fairy tale, this is true and wonderful, and is for you! Listen up, this is the good news of Jesus Christ - and so that's exactly how Mark's gospel begins. ***The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*** Here it is! Pay attention! And then Mark goes on to put this simple theme on display, to reveal Christ as the Son of God. Jesus is the one who came just as promised. The Messiah, the Christ, had come! Mark would make that clear, and so just as Isaiah before him pointed so poignantly to the coming Messiah, Mark would show how the Scriptures were fulfilled in Christ. And thus, the Words of God given by Isaiah and repeated by Mark, now point us to another important messenger, the promised forerunner of the Savior, that is, John. God sent John, and the one known as John the Baptist, had, "*pay attention to this important*

message,” written all over him. After a 400-year silence, when there were no God-given prophets since Malachi, that silence was absolutely shattered when just as God had promised through Isaiah, *a voice in the wilderness* began to cry out! And people flocked to John. They came to see what all the fuss was about. They came to hear him speak, to listen to his message. Everything about John was unique. He was like this throwback to the prophets of old, like Elijah... and how he spoke with such authority! He stood out as different in a good way! His clothes, the food that he ate, how and where he lived, and his message! It all made for a buzz that the people would not miss. God would use this unique messenger to prepare the way for Jesus, to get people thinking about their sin and their Savior. And so compelled and drawn in by God’s messenger and his God-given message, the people went out in the wilderness to see him. He was sent to a desolate people, whose hope had begun to dry up and fade away. And he would proclaim the message that they needed to hear. The Messiah, the Savior, that all people truly needed was coming!

God continues to send messengers out today for this remains a message that we all need. As trouble dries us out like a leaf, as hope seems sparse in this sinful world, God does not forget his promises and so he sends out his word, he sends out messengers to speak this all-important message that we need to hear. Like a river in an arid place, God gives us new life and needed refreshment. God doesn’t want anyone to miss out on this message, so he sends his compelling message still today.

But remember that this message is a message that we need, not necessarily a message that we as human beings will always want to hear. Think about some of those important messages that you have heard before and how they started. *Are you sitting down? I have some bad news for you.* The bad news is you **need** a Savior - for you and me and the entire human race we are all sinners, every one of us. *There is no one who is righteous not even one. We have all fallen short of the glory of God.* We are sinners each and every one. That might seem obvious, but it needs to be pointed out to you, and often. For we instinctively push this problem of sin away. We keep it an arm’s distance. Our sinful nature does all it can to repress this truth that we need to hear.

Again, there is something instinctive about this reaction. A good example of this can be seen in young children. Sit down with a bunch of kids: preschoolers, kindergartners, or children who are even a little older and ask them this question. *“Are you a sinner?”* It is revealing to see what their response so often is. *“No.”* They make this innocent claim as they bat their eyes at you. *“No, I’m not a sinner. I’m not bad.”* Even after they fuss and kick and pout and scream and disobey, they will turn around and they are fully convinced that they are good, at least mostly good.

As we get older, we develop ways to hold on to that same idea, even though we should know better. We convince ourselves we aren’t that bad. We aren’t that sinful. We are fine. Watch any holiday movie and the not so subtle lie is that deep down we are all good inside. But we aren’t. The simple truth is that we are sin-sick and born dead in sin. We are infected with sin and it is hereditary and passed down and contagious and

terminal. By nature, we are decaying and dead in sin, rotten and corrupted from the inside out. We are so twisted up in sin that it takes someone to point that out to you. We need someone to sit us down and tell us that hard truth!

That's what John did, right! He preached a baptism of repentance. Turn from your sin. Be cleansed. You are dirty and sinful and dying. It was a message that the people needed to hear. It is a message that we need to hear as well.

First of all, I have bad news. That is a sentence that is hard to hear, but there are times when it is absolutely necessary. Think of how a doctor will sit you down and tell a terminal patient about what is going on inside of them. *Take a seat, listen carefully, I have something to tell you.* The doctor has looked at the scans and the images taken of the inside of the patient clearly reveal it is not good, no matter how manageable things might seem on the surface. The diagnosis is dire. The doctor has something extremely important to say. Just as you wouldn't want your doctor to lie to you or even sugar coat it and leave the really bad stuff out, God sends his Word and his messenger to point out the ugly truth of sin. We need someone to point out the real big problem, the threat of sin, and how we are lost and condemned sinners by nature. The problem of sin is not just some mistakes that we make or flaws that we have, and if we just make the right adjustments, we can fix it. No, the problem of sin, is worse, for all of us. It is so terribly worse. *The wages of sin is death*, eternal death, and there is no way around it. The diagnosis is dire. And this is something we need to hear and have set in.

But along with this bad news, the LORD sends word of the good news, the absolutely terrific and saving news in Christ Jesus! Notice, this is what John does too, and he does it in a way that will drive that point home so vividly. *John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins!* John made no bones about it. As sinners we are filthy, covered with sin and we need to be washed and cleansed. He made that truth stick out with the grace-filled visual aid of Baptism and then he boldly pointed to Jesus. John came with this powerful message of law and gospel: the bad news of sin along with the good news of God's grace in Christ.

As he prepares the way for the Messiah, John knows that's all he can do. Proclaim the message and point to the one to come. And so according to God's will, John sets the stage. He prepares the way. He proclaims the message. Someone greater, the King, the Messiah, God's own Son is coming. Even John, this great prophet, is unworthy to stand before a holy God. Even he is unworthy to stoop down and untie the sandals of the one who was to come, for John is aware that he is a sinner too.

And so our Savior, the Savior of the world would come and he would deliver the very forgiveness that was needed. He would not just cleanse people in an outward way, to get them looking nice and clean in appearance only. But Jesus would come with the Holy Spirit who would clean them from the inside out. He would create saving faith in their hearts as he would fulfill and spread the message of salvation. He would create in them a new heart and bring them from death to life. For again, sin is not just a surface thing that can be addressed by some topical piety. Sin comes from deep within, it kills, it

corrupts, and then it oozes out of us. We are dirty and sick and suffering because we are infected, and we need to be cleansed and cured, healed, revived, saved from the death within us.

There's that the bad news, that needs to be stated. You are a sinner. You need a Savior. But here's the good news; the Savior comes for you. He comes to save you and wash you clean. He comes to save you from sin and death and give you new life. This is the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The one greater than John is the holy one of God, and he would be holy in John's place and our place as well. He would take on our flesh and walk John our sandals, and our shoes - however, you want to say it. He came and lived in our place in a way that we could not. He would fulfill the law perfectly in our place, and then he would trudge willingly to the cross to wash us clean with his holy precious blood. He is the Christ, the Son of God, the Messiah, and He washes you clean and makes you new. And he comes with his Word and Sacraments and he creates and strengthens faith in your hearts with his gift of the Holy Spirit! Hear and believe and trust and be renewed in this all-important message! Christ Jesus comes near!

Dear friends, pay attention to this news that you need to hear! Jesus is coming as the Savior that we as sinners need! Consider why this makes Advent and Christmas so important! The fact that Jesus was born is not merely some cheerful tale of a baby in Bethlehem once upon a time. The Son of God comes into human history as a child for you. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who comes as the Savior that we absolutely needed! The sinless comes for the sinner, to wash you clean, to save you from death, he comes for you and me! This is the message that God surely wants you to hear.

This Advent season, hear once more the sound of the voice calling in the desert, make straight paths for the King of Kings. Clear the path, as this message and this Savior comes your way. Don't let that all-important message of salvation in the gift of Christ Jesus get buried under the massive amount of commercial holiday clutter. Don't let that message of salvation be diminished because of the holiday customs that might be missing this year. The message is still here, it is still powerful, it is still incredibly compelling, and eternally important! This is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The good news of our God remains and endures forever! The Savior comes as needed for sinners like you and me! Thank God for the messengers who prepare our hearts to hear that good news! Thank God that this message has been placed before us again. Praise the Lord that it grabs our attention and opens our ears and our hearts and minds and makes us wise for salvation!

Christ comes in Baptism, in His Word, through Holy Communion, for the forgiveness of sins. Christ Jesus comes to wash your sins away. Christ comes just as promised and in his saving grace he sends messengers out to prepare our hearts and minds to hear and receive this good news! Christ will come again to take us to be with him forever! Give thanks to God for his messengers of the Gospel! Give thanks to God for Jesus Christ the Son of God, who comes to take your sins away! Amen.