

“Continue Preparing The Way ”

Mark 1:1-8

December 10, 2017

2nd Sunday of Advent

A professor was making an impassioned plea to his class about the importance of doing good work, both in coursework there at the university and especially, later on in life, in their careers. He stressed working hard and being thorough in whatever they did. He concluded his speech by saying, “Remember, any job that is done correctly the first time need never be done again.” The hand of a smartalec in the back row went up and he asked, “What about mowing the lawn?” Generally speaking, the comment made by the professor is true. Many jobs, when they are done right, don’t need to be done again. However, there are certain jobs and activities that, no matter how well they are done, need to be done over and over again. Today we want to talk about one of those “jobs” in our lives of faith.

On the 2nd Sunday of Advent, we usually focus our attention on the ministry of John the Baptist whose job it was to prepare the way of the Lord for His coming. The general theme of his message had to do with repentance, an activity which is often misunderstood these days, not only in the world, but also in the church. In which category of activities should repentance be placed? Is repentance an activity that, if done correctly, never needs to be done again? Or, is it an activity which must be done over and over again?

Repentance is an activity which is often talked about, but perhaps is not understood. The word for repentance in the Greek literally means “a change or turning of the mind or heart.” Biblically speaking, repentance refers to a turning FROM sin in sorrow and regret and a turning TO Christ in faith and in action. How is repentance going for you?

Unbelievers and nominal Christians probably don’t believe in repentance at all. They quite frankly don’t see a need for it. Those who are Christian in name only believe they are generally pretty good people, even though they do admit to some flaws. Therefore, they don’t believe they need to turn from anything at all.

In the same way, those who do not believe in a God also do not believe in a need for repentance because they have no one to turn in repentance to. The unbeliever, by definition, believes in no God while the nominal Christian only believes in a God that already likes him. In either case, there is no need to repent for such people.

Some believers in our Lord Jesus Christ (and this may include you), while believing in repentance and the real need for it, only disagree about the frequency of repentance that is required. Some Christians may think repentance is a one time thing – something you may have done when you were baptized or confirmed. However, after that, you’re good to go.

Other Christians may see repentance as only an occasional activity. It’s something we do in the beginning of the liturgy whenever we happen to come to church. Perhaps we see a day like the 2nd Sunday of Advent when we talk about John the Baptist every year as a good reminder about repentance. We can leave church

feeling that we have checked the old “repentance reminder” off our list of holiday things to do for yet another year.

If our attitude toward repentance is anything like this – an unneeded religious ritual or an occasional and traditional part of our piety – then we have severely misunderstood the message, not only of our text, but of the entire Bible. Repentance is an important, necessary, and continuous activity of every Christian. In Martin Luther’s famous 95 Theses (which were mainly about the relationship between the church’s practice of penance and the biblical teaching on repentance), the first thesis said this, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

In the laid-back world of the 21st century, Luther might seem to be just a little bit extreme in his view here. After all, is sin that serious of an issue that it demands that much attention? Is there really evil in this world from which we need to turn or does it all boiled down to a bunch of inappropriate actions or unfortunate choices?

With all of the terrorist acts, school shootings, and random acts of violence which seem to occupy our television sets on a nightly basis, even unbelievers are forced to admit the reality of evil in our world. This can no longer be denied. Christians, on the other hand, are forced to admit the reality of sin in our lives as it is described and decried in the Law of God – 10 Commandments. Sin, the violation of any of these commandments, cannot be denied, overlooked, ignored, or interpreted away. Sin is real and evil is real.

However, maybe sin and evil, even though they are problems, may not be really that bad of problems. Maybe sin and evil can be reduced (rather than repented of) by simply trying harder to do better. A study of the Word of God shows that this is not the case. Not only do all of those random acts shown on the nightly news point to an increase in evil (and therefore sin), the problem of sin is greater than we even think.

There is a great difference between the way the world measures evil and sin and the way the Word of God defines sin. Many things, especially in the area of sexual behavior, which the world deems to be perfectly good and acceptable are, in fact, violations of the word of God.

It goes deeper than that. God, in His Word, has a much broader definition of sin. Not only are many actions defined as sin in the Bible, but also our words, our thoughts, our attitudes, and our feelings are frequently defined as sinful.

Sin is such a pervasive problem in the lives of all people, Christians and non-Christians alike. We know this to be true by common observation – just seeing the things that people do or say. We also know this to be true through the Word of God which says all have sinned and have fallen short of Him.

We also can see this by the narrative in our Gospel reading for today. God sends a messenger to prepare the way for the coming Messiah by calling for repentance – the turning away from sin and evil and the turning to the Lord in faith. Notice to whom God sent this messenger. He did not send it to those pagan Gentiles and wicked sinners. God send this messenger to His own people, the Jews. They were not immune from sin or the need to repent. God was calling His own people to repentance and faith – or else.

The message is still valid for us today. None of us are immune from sin and its consequences. None of us are exempt from the need to repent. Repentance is not just a message for wicked people and unbelievers. The Church needs to hear it as well you and I need to hear it, too. The message of John the Baptist is just as valid for us today as it was for the Jews back then.

What do we do with this call to repent – to turn from our sin and its evil and to turn to our Lord Jesus Christ, both in faith and in action? It doesn't appear that we often take it very seriously. We become indifferent to our sin. We live as if we have no sin or that the sin we do have is not all that important. We become ignorant of our need for repentance, either because we believe our sin is not all that big or that repentance is not all that necessary. In short, like the Jews of John's time, we begin to take God's mercy for granted, either by continuing to sin or by thinking that we are so good we do not need God's grace.

If we continue to deliberately sin and not turn from that sin and not turn to the Lord Jesus in faith, then we will go to the place prepared by God for the Originator of sin and evil, the devil, and all of his evil angels and wicked followers: hell. For where there is no repentance from sin, there is no forgiveness for sin. Yet, if we are unable to live the lives God wants us to live and are unable to correct the problem on our own, what are we to do? Hear the words and see the ministry of John the Baptist.

John is not just a cranky old prophet off on a rant. He is not just bawling out the people out of his own personal frustration over their behavior. He not only identifies a very specific problem, but he also points toward a specific and complete solution for the problem of sin and evil and he has been given the task by God of preparing the way for that solution by helping people to see their need for that solution.

First of all, our text begins with the words, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ," and not the beginning of the judgment of Jesus Christ. There is gospel, that is, good news for the people. And that good news is to be found in the One who is to come. John says that, after him, comes one who is mightier than him – Someone who can actually solve the problem instead of just pointing it out like he was doing. This is no ordinary prophet or preacher for whom John is preparing the way. John is preparing "the way of the Lord". It is the Lord Himself, the very Son of God, who will come to deal with His people. That is good news. As the people of John's day eagerly waited for the Lord to come, we, in our day, also wait eagerly for the Lord to come again.

Second of all, the rest of the Gospel of Mark reveals what the Lord was coming to do. While He is coming to judge all sin, He first comes in love and mercy to redeem His people by giving His life on the cross as the sacrifice for sin; to offer forgiveness of sin to all who believe in Him; to offer His righteousness to us in place of "the filthy rags" of our best attempts to do good; and to give eternal life by virtue of His resurrection from the dead.

Third of all, John prepares the people to receive these great gifts by "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John pulls no punches in his preaching (as we see by the accounts of his ministry in the other Gospels). He strongly and directly condemns their sin and calls for repentance. But he doesn't do this for the sake of beating up the consciences of injured sinners. John's preaching of the law

points people to a cleansing baptism which leads to repentance and awakes in the people the need for the forgiveness which Jesus would bring.

Today, as we become more aware of our sin by the preaching of the law, the reading of the Word of God, or our own guilty consciences, we are driven to repentance, not to earn forgiveness for our sins or to be tortured, as in Luther's day, to recall every single sin before it could be forgiven. We confess our sins and repent of them, not for the sake of the confessing, but for the sake of the forgiveness – the full and complete forgiveness for all of our sin which we receive in the Holy Absolution, the reading and preaching of the Word of God, and in His Holy Supper.

As we continue to live as sinners in this life, we find that we are never ever finished with the job of repentance. We driven to repent again and again and again. The Good News is that, despite all of our sin and our need to repent of it frequently, there is always plenty of God's grace available to repentant sinners and His action of forgiving sin never ceases.

Therefore, having repented of our sin and having received forgiveness, there is to be real change in our lives. "Repent" does not mean I regret having done these things nor I'm sorry that I was caught doing them. It means to turn from that sin in all of its evil and to turn to God in all of His righteousness. By the guiding of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, we shall see His righteous way. By the power of the Holy Spirit through that same Word of God, we will be empowered to walk the way of the Lord. And when we fall off that way – either to the left by doing evil things or to the right by not doing good things – there is only one thing to do – more repentance again and again.

Some activities, even if they are done well, have to be done over and over again this is true of lawns, snow removal, haircuts, and so on. Repentance is just such an activity. It doesn't matter whether you are a pious Christian or a nominal one; having a lot of sin or thinking you have so little; have repented occasionally or repented often. As long as you and I are in this body, we will have sin. As long as we have sin, we are in need of repentance. And as long as we repent, we receive the Lords full and complete pardon and forgiveness. And as long as we have his full pardon and complete forgiveness, we turn from sin to Him in faith and action. And we continue to do this as long as we live on this earth and until we die and join our Lord in heaven. And then, and only then, is repentance finished. Amen.