

# *Ascension Lutheran Church*

*Pastor Godkin's Sermon for the week of December 7, 2008*

## Have Your Heart Prepared for the Coming of Jesus (Mark 1:1-8)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text is from the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel according to St. Mark:

“It is written in Isaiah the prophet, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness; prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.’”

This is the text.

Dear friends in Christ, when people have guests at their homes they usually make special preparations; perhaps they prepare some tea or coffee, or provide some small snack or a meal. When we want to show hospitality to a special guest there's a saying that we “roll out the red carpet”. In 1967 Montreal was the host for the World's Fair, Exp 67 as it was called. This was a highly successful World's Fair. Our city rolled out the red carpet for the world. One of the things that made it such a great success was all the preparations the city made. Some of the most notable of these were the Island of St. Helen which was enlarged and the Island of Notre Dame which was built along with various other facilities. In order to welcome people and leaders from all over the world Montreal improved its transportation system as well and constructed the Metro in time for the Fair in '67.

In our text today we see the powerful figure of John the Baptist. He came to make preparations as well. He came to prepare the world for the coming of a special King. He makes an attention-getting appearance to say the least. He didn't wear a suit with dress shoes or a white robe. Instead, it says he wore camel's hair and a leather belt. For food, he ate locusts and wild honey. He was a little eccentric to be sure though he was also the picture of self-denial and single-minded focus on His mission to prepare the way of the Lord.

John was the “voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.’” Just as the Metro has improved Montreal's transportation system and made for a smoother way around the city, John the Baptist called the people of His day of Judea and Jerusalem as well as us today to have the way of our hearts prepared for Christ's coming. The words of the Baptist, God's messenger, still cry out in the wilderness of our world today, “Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”

Friends, when we want to go someplace we often have several options. If, for instance, you go to Google Maps on the internet to get directions there are different routes provided to the same place. The route depends on whether you go by car, by bus, or by walking or whether you avoid highways and tolls or not. You may also choose between a route that has the shortest distance and a route that has the shortest time. There are

many ways it seems. In our world in general there are many ways of doing things it seems. There are options, sometimes too many options. It can be confusing.

On a spiritual level in terms of salvation, unlike the world, there is only one option. The one way to heaven is Jesus Christ. He says in John 14:6, "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." In our society today, sadly, the notion of "tolerance" has become the high road of morality instead of truth. To say that Jesus is the One Saviour and the only salvation from death and the devil and sin is a lonesome voice in our world where many people have discarded the truth.

Like John, the church today is like one voice crying in the wilderness. It is the voice of truth in Jesus Christ amidst the many voices that speak the lies of Satan. Satan has confused the world with many false teachings about God. But Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Only in Christ we find a God of grace who in His love went the whole way and died so we could live with Him, and who would rather go through hell on the cross than to go to heaven without us.

Friends, Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount, "Broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Mt. 7:13-14). Jesus is the small gate and narrow road and God wants everyone to have this life in Christ and so He sends the message of repentance to prepare the way for Him to our hearts. He says in Ezekiel 33, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live".

He leads us to confess our sins so He may have mercy on us. If you have cursed or used profanity, or said the Lord's name in vain, these are crooked roads. Sinful attitudes such as apathy or being reluctant to pray or read our Bible put up roadblocks to our walk with Christ. But He promises grace and every blessing when we confess. It says in First John, "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins." This is the grace we have in Jesus. He has won this for us by His perfect life, His atoning sacrifice and resurrection. As Psalm 16 says, "You have made known to me the Path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand."

In a few short weeks we will celebrate the birth of our Saviour. Advent is the season when we anticipate His coming. It is a season of hope and expectation of good things to come. We expect greater things than the gifts under the tree. Just as John the Baptizer expected someone greater than Himself. He said, "After me comes He who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie." John was a prophet and a man of God but Jesus is much more. He is the God-man. John spoke the word of God but Jesus is the Word of God. He is God in the flesh. As God He has no beginning and no end. He is the Creator and the Redeemer, the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega. John saw his role as the one who pointed people to Jesus. He said, "He must become greater. I must become less."

In the ancient Middle East when a king would visit another country he would send a messenger ahead to tell the people. The people would then improve the roads to make his arrival a smooth one. Jesus is the ultimate King, the King of Heaven and Earth. His

Kingdom is at hand. We come to Him and confess our crooked ways and He leads us on His straight and narrow path of life. He leads the way back to our Baptism where He first washed us and made us His own. He builds us up through the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word. As Psalm 23 says, "He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

In the early church believers were called followers of the "The Way". The Way was more than a way of life. The Way is Jesus Himself. The Old Testament reading says, "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low" (Is. 40:4). The mountain and hill here are our pride and stubbornness in doing things our way instead of God's way. He humbles us and shows us our sins and brings us low like a valley so that He may lift us up again and show Jesus as Saviour; who went the way of the cross to become the way of salvation. He also shows us how to love others in the same way that He has loved us – to forgive one another 70 times 7 times a day with the same forgiveness He's given us. We follow His way of praying for those who sin against us as Jesus prayed on the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing". As followers of the Way we follow His way of encouraging each other in the faith.

Through Him we do these things as we look with repentant joy and expectant hope for the return of our glorious King who is coming soon. May the King Jesus Christ bless you and lead you as His instrument in ever increasing measure until His coming. Amen. The peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.