

Get Ready and Prepare

Advent Midweek #1 – 11/30/22 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Mark 1:1-4 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 2-3, **“As 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’...”**”.

✘ All four of the Gospel writers say the same thing about John the forerunner, but Mark places him right at the Gospel’s opening.

→ Chapter 1:4 says that John the Baptizer “appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”.

✘ For Mark this is where the Gospel, or the Good News, of the Christ begins. It truly is good news being realized that the promised forerunner of the Savior appears and makes his divine announcement, “Prepare the way”. That is, clear the road, remove all obstacles. Whatever you are doing, get ready for the Lord Himself to come!

→ The prophet Isaiah said that the voice of John is from “the wilderness”. But when John speaks, he is more than a voice in the wilderness crying, “Prepare the way”.

✘ When people asked John the simple question, “What shall we do?” he told them in Luke 3:8, “Bear fruits in keeping with repentance”, such as sharing food and clothing with those in need, refraining from cheating in the taxing process and from using force and violence. Why? because these things necessarily bring judgment, and the Judge is ready to burn the chaff (not the wheat) “with unquenchable fire” (Lk. 3:17). The chaff is all that is evil and unrepentant.

→ Both the prophets Isaiah and Malachi declared the necessity that the way of the Lord be prepared before His coming. So, what are the particulars of those prophecies? Well it’s always best to go to Scripture itself for the interpretation. In Isaiah’s long book of 66 chapters, one third of those chapters – chapters 40-66 – are full of hope and promise; where God’s vision is laid out because of His grace and goodness.

→ That section is almost like another gospel because it talks about salvation and mercy; grace and love. The Ethiopian eunuch in Acts, chapter 8 read that section while he was traveling along the way from Jerusalem to Egypt, down the Gaza strip. And when Philip saw him, he ran to him and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And [the eunuch] said, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’”

→ So, what did Philip do? He sat in the chariot with the man and explained that Isaiah was talking about the good news that comes to us in Jesus. You see, that’s the key to Isaiah. Chapters 40-66 are filled with songs and oracles of hope and strength, dealing especially with the news of a Messiah; a Suffering Servant of God; One by whom salvation comes to God’s Creation.

→ All a person needs to do is look intently at Christ in the crib and on the cross, and the entire book of Isaiah explains itself!

✘ And you know what went immediately before that Gospel section of Isaiah in chapters 40-66? In chapter 39 we hear of a meeting of King Hezekiah with the representatives of the super-power, Babylon.

→ Hezekiah was afraid of them. So he tried to appease that hostile force by showing them all of his treasures, gems, gold and weaponry. Isaiah asked the king about the visit and when he heard the king’s report, he told him how foolish he had been because Babylon was looking to

take over and absorb Palestine into its empire; that they would take all that he owned away to Babylon.

- ✘ Because Hezekiah and the people of Israel had turned away from God and did not trust Him for help and protection, God indeed allowed Babylon to come and have their way. This is often the way that God works even in our own lives today. Why? because of our unrepentant sin as well.
 - ➔ Isaiah told Hezekiah that even the king's children would not be safe from exile. But Hezekiah still felt good. He thought time was on his side. He pridefully believed that trouble could not touch him. Because he was trusting in earthly powers, he was sure that peace and security would be with him always.
- ✘ It is against that background that Isaiah looks into the future and gives an oracle of a loving Lord who longs to show love; who cares enough to pardon His people and bring them safely home from Babylon where they would end up as exiles for 70 years.
 - ➔ This shows just how wonderful our Lord really is; giving punishment yet even in the midst of that punishment He is already planning pardon and forgiveness!
 - ➔ Thus we hear Isaiah write in chapter 53:5 of a Suffering Servant who is “wounded for our transgressions” and “crushed for our iniquities; upon [whom] was the chastisement that brought us peace”.
- ✘ Then in chapter 40 of Isaiah – our Old Testament Reading tonight – God speaks and says, “Comfort, comfort My people” (40:1). “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins”.
 - ➔ This is the continuing, constant voice of our God, who has compassion and love for all of us; who sees our sin and knows the punishment that we deserve. Yet God does not want to condemn even one sinner. He wants to pardon the sinner and give him/her life.
 - ➔ But that does not change the fact that punishment must come. Discipline for wrongs must be handed out. It is tough, but it is necessary in true love.
- ✘ And so Isaiah says that three voices are heard. The first voice, in verse three says that Israel shall return home to Jerusalem, the enemy will be crushed, and the world will see God vindicate His own people. That voice says, “Prepare the way in the wilderness for God, for we are coming home”.
 - ➔ The second voice, starting in verse six says, “Cry!” In other words, “Speak out!” So Isaiah asks, “What shall I cry?” The voice says that all things vanish and pass away as grass and wild flowers die, but God's Word is different. His Word “will stand forever” (v.8). All of His promises are certain and sure.
 - ➔ And then in verse nine a third voice cries out to Jerusalem, “Get you up to a high mountain”, that is Mt. Zion; the place of God's promised presence in the Holy Temple. Speak strongly, loudly, clearly, that God comes with great “might” as Lord of all, to rule over all (v. 10).
 - ➔ This is the same voice that talks about the mighty Lord as a shepherd, leading His flock; giving His life for His sheep; gathering His lambs in His arm and embracing them.
- ✘ And what do you know, that is exactly what happened, isn't it! Christ, the Good Shepherd, laid down His life for the sheep and conquered all of our enemies – the flesh, the evil world, the power of sin, and our last enemy, death.
 - ➔ When Mark begins the good news of Jesus, he properly takes those same words from Isaiah and by the power of the Spirit shows their fulfillment in John the Baptizer. He says in Mark 1:2-

3, “As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, ‘Behold I send My messenger...the voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight,”’.”

→ Yes, the Lord comes to rule; to conquer; to overcome. He comes as a shepherd to lead His flock and gather the lambs into His saving arms.

✘ That’s what Advent is about. We get ready. We prepare to receive Him. For in Him we behold the Destroyer of death; the Subduer of Satan; the Savior from sin, bringing each of us back from our exile into our Father’s house so that we might live and remain in His heavenly home forever.

→ When King Hezekiah pridefully displayed his kingdom’s treasures to Babylon, they came in and devoured his land and people as he foolishly deserved. Something like what happens to us when “...the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). Yes, when we, in the weakness of our faith, use the talents and gifts that God gave to us to do good; when we pridefully use them for the evil of this world and our own sinful flesh, we put ourselves in danger of being devoured by Satan and taken away from our heavenly home.

✘ This, of course concerned God greatly; so much so that He promised to come. And as the time of His coming came near He sent His chosen messenger to “prepare the way” for Him to overcome sin and death and hell by the Child in the manger.

✘ I said that two prophets foretold a coming messenger whose task it was to “Prepare the way” for the coming Messiah. The second prophet was Malachi, whose book is the last in the Old Testament.

→ As we said, the Jerusalem temple had been destroyed by Babylon and all of its treasures taken away. Years later, two patriots, Ezra and Nehemiah asked and received permission to return and rebuild the city and temple. But instead of joy and gratitude, as they returned, the same old sins and even some new ones developed among the people and priests of Israel in the form of neglected offerings and tithes, abused sacrifices, and prayers and services that were empty of God’s Word, while God’s law was ignored by all.

→ So Malachi says that the Lord will come to His temple; His house and will refine it with “fire” and cleanse it with strong “soap” (Mal. 3:2). And he quotes the LORD in chapter 3:1, “Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me.”

→ Malachi closes his book with God saying, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes” (Mal 4:5).

✘ Well, we learn in the Gospels that John the Baptizer is that messenger prophesied by both Isaiah and Malachi. He’s the one who points to Jesus and proclaims in John 1:29, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

→ It is Jesus as well who has been given judgment by the Father; having His fork in His hand to separate the chaff from the wheat at the end of time.

✘ So we gather now in Advent to prepare to celebrate the comfort that Isaiah talks about. And as we do, we see on the horizon – still in our future, the day and time of which we do not know, when Jesus will come again to separate the wheat from the chaff; the sheep from the goats; the righteous from the unrighteous.

→ You see, we can’t look back and prepare to celebrate His first coming at Christmas without looking forward in joy and expectation at His promised return. The grace, compassion, love, and kindness of the Lord comes with all of its “Glory to God in the highest” at Bethlehem. But the return of our Lord to take His very own sheep to Himself lies before us as well in this season of Advent.

✘ So with one look God prepares the way so that we exiles can return. And He uses His messenger John, even with us today, to help us prepare the way for the Lord in our hearts and minds as He comes to us in Word and Sacrament, and as we look ahead to the Day of His glorious return. Amen.