

Sermon: The Beginning of the Good News

John the Baptizer was an amazingly popular figure. Everybody in Jerusalem and people from all over the Judean countryside went out to listen to him preach. But they didn't just listen—they responded, they confessed their sins and were baptized! Not only was John popular, but he was also successful.

For all his popularity and success, though, John was strikingly different from the average man. Many people respond to great popularity and success with a certain degree of pride and swagger. But from the beginning, John the Baptizer was different.

Mark's gospel sometimes seems like a surprising place to start when we're beginning Advent. After all, we know that at Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, but when Mark begins, he skips any mention of how Jesus is born, and jumps straight to Jesus as a thirty-year old, embarking on the beginning of his ministry.

Matthew and Luke are the gospels that treat us to the stories of angels and shepherds and wise men and mangers that we love, and even John's gospel, with its image of a light in the darkness feels appropriately like a Christmas story.

But Mark gives us nothing more than this at the start of his gospel: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Boom. And he's off and running.

But I love it. I love Mark's gospel. He is so intent on making sure you know about Jesus and the good news Jesus brings, that he can't slow down long enough to give us more than what he considers the essentials.

And Mark isn't so much concerned with how Jesus was born as he is with the fact that Jesus is here, and we need to be ready, and we might want to do some self-reflection and some changing of our lives, changing our heart and minds because of Jesus's presence.

So, as Mark opens his gospel, he centers us in words from Isaiah: God is sending a messenger who will prepare the way for the Messiah, the voice of one who is crying out in the wilderness, calling us to "Prepare the way of

the Lord” and “Make straight” a path for God in the world. These may not be nativity words, but they are Advent words. Prepare. Get ready. Someone is coming and we need to get ready.

John the Baptizer appears in the wilderness, calling people to repent, so that their sins might be forgiven. To repent means to change the direction of your life, to change the direction of your heart and mind, to get off the wrong-way road you were traveling on, and turn back to God.

John tells people to do this – to repent – and they do. Mark says that people “from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem” were coming to John, confessing their sins. John tells them: someone else is coming, and I’m just his servant. I’ve baptized you, cleansed you with water. He will cleanse you by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

John doesn’t say the “The Messiah is coming, now get yourself together!” No, he says “repent.” Your life is not together. There is no sense in pretending that it is. Repent. As we make “room” for Jesus in our lives we must do the same. The path to Jesus is not found through perfection but rather through repentance.

John the Baptizer tells the people to get ready, help is on the way, and the people respond by getting to work at once, so that they are ready for this arrival of this hopeful good news that is coming. They’re repenting and confessing, and being cleansed in baptismal waters. When Jesus arrives, they want to be ready for what is next, ready to live into the hope that John has given them.

How about us? Are we hopeful people? What are we hoping for this season? How are we longing, pining for God to be at work in our lives right now?

And what are we doing because of that hope? Mark describes a whole people filled with expectation about this one that John was promising and describing to them. They didn’t just listen to John’s words and sit passively, waiting for Jesus to show up. They were filled with hope, and so they got busy.

And with that hope they started repenting now, not waiting for Jesus to arrive. They let John cleanse their spirits as they confessed their sins, so that they would be ready to do whatever Jesus wanted them to do.

They were so full of hope, and that hope led them to act, because they had faith that their hope in God would not disappoint them.

I think how we hope is important. Sometimes we know why we're hopeful, but we don't let that hope spur us into action.

Deep hope, built on faith and trust in God, is an active longing that starts working right away to embody and enact the very things for which we are hopeful.

I know we lit the candle of Peace today, but can we have that Peace without our strong and overpowering hope?

The longer we pray, the more we are sure of this: Prayer is not so much about convincing God to do what we want God to do as it is about convincing ourselves to do what God wants us to do.

That's sort of how I think about hope: we hope for the possibility of God's work in the world, and then we get to work as God's laborers in the world, trusting that God will do what God promises, and getting started on our part as soon as possible, to building a world of Peace.

So, as we journey through this Advent season, what are we hoping for, when you think about God coming to us in-the-flesh?

What is our Advent hope, and what are we going to do about it?

This Advent, I'm hopeful. I'm hopeful that it will be filled with the Peace that God so desperately wants for us.

I'm hopeful that Christ is continually born into our midst, continually reminding us that God is with us.

I'm hopeful enough that I want to prepare my life, and my heart again. Hopeful enough that I want to make sure that I'm going in God's direction, not the wrong direction. And hopeful enough that instead of waiting

passively, I'm going to wait actively, working to carry out the good news right now, because my hope is built on faith in God's promises, which never disappoints us.

We're waiting, yes. But with a thrill of hope in our hearts, filled with the peace and love of the Holy Spirit. So, let's get to work while we wait. Amen.