

LIFE-CHANGING GOSPEL POWER: 'PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD'

A sermon for Sunday, December 10, 2017, by the Rev. Dr. James Mutayoba
THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Gospel: **Mark 1:1-8** *John the Baptist Prepares the Way*

"¹The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ²As it is written in the Prophets:

*"Behold, I send My messenger before Your face,
Who will prepare Your way before You.*

³The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

*'Prepare the way of the Lord;
Make His paths straight.'*"

⁴John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. ⁵Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And he preached, saying, "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. ⁸I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

It is the 2nd Sunday in Advent: Calling us to prepare the way of the Lord. Of all the Gospels, only the Gospel of Mark begins with the following words: **The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.** (Mark 1:1)

Beginning, means the **starting point**; the **commencing** of an event. Advent is the beginning of the Church Year, the time of waiting for **Christ's birth**, but more importantly, of waiting for his **Second coming as Judge** of all. The **starting point** is the nativity of Jesus Christ, which culminates in his death and resurrection for the purpose of salvation.

This account is called the **Good News** from the Greek word, **euangelion**. Mark is writing the Good tidings of **Jesus Christ, the Son of God**.

What is the Gospel? What is this Good news?

The meaning is found in Romans 1:16; **the GOSPEL is 'the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes; Jews first and Gentiles alike.'** The Gospel is **God's power** not human power. It changes people's lives. This **word power** is translated from the Greek '**dunamis**.' It comes from the same root as the English word **dynamite**, and it means just that! The Gospel is the **EXPLOSIVE POWER** that transforms people's lives. And it is **divine power**.

Behind this explosive power is **the name Jesus** from the Hebrew- **Yehoshua, (Joshua)** meaning, **Jehovah Saves** -- Jesus **saves**. The Gospel is about **the Lord who saves**. Mark calls **Jesus the Christ**, from the Hebrew **Mashiach** (English **Messiah**) which means, **the Anointed One**. Only **Kings** and **High Priests** in Israel were anointed.

Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit after his Baptism. The voice from heaven announced, **'This is my Son in whom I am well pleased.'** Jesus is **King of kings** and **Lord of lords**. What a title for Mark's Gospel.

According to Mark, the good news is foretold by the prophet Isaiah. It begins in the **desert ... a wilderness ... a desolate place**. It does not begin in the **fertile prairies of the mid-west** but in the desolate **sand dunes**, with **Gecko lizards**, and **thorny cacti**. The place where vegetation is rare because of the harsh weather conditions. The **Arizona desert** is such a place. **A rough uneven terrain that has claimed the lives of many trying to cross over to the US from Mexico**. Deserts are **dry, waterless, inhabitable places of death**. Some regard deserts as **dangerous, threatening, natural wonders**.

Biblically speaking, **desert places are places of temptation**.

The irony is, the glad tidings are directed toward the **parched places of our souls**. When **our souls** experience **EMPTINESS**, become a **VOID**, that's when we need the Gospel's **life changing power**. When **drought strikes in our heart** we experience a **spiritual thirst from within the soul**.

The **desert** has its place in the history of the salvation. **God prepared, molded and conditioned the Jews** for the **Promised Land in the desert**. They experienced **life's hard challenges** and **learned to rely on God**. Their **survival during their 40 years of wandering in the desert depended on God's providence and mercy**. At a later time, God led the Jews **across the desert from exile in Babylon** to restore them to the **Promised Land**.

Learn this, **God takes us through HIS own type of 'security system'** to reshape us both **mentally and spiritually**. When you are in a kind of spiritual **wilderness**, you are probably being **MOLDED or SHAPED** to become what God wants you to be.

If **there is no emptiness, no void in our hearts**, then we are not yet ripe enough for the Gospel. **Emptiness creates a receptive environment, a need, a desire for the life-changing dynamite -- the Gospel**.

The Good news quenches and nourishes our souls!

When we feel content, our desire for the good news withers and dies off.

The good news of salvation begins with **the ancient cry of John the Baptist: "PREPARE THE WAY! REPENT!"** John the Baptist **comes to all displaced people of every time and every place; people who have been cut off from God by sin**. **Separation from God** is metaphorically a **desert place**, a place of **displacement**. It is also a place of **repentance ... self-adjustment ... self-examination**.

How do we know that John the Baptist identified with the displaced?

1. His menu included such *delicacies* as **locusts** and **wild honey**. Locusts are **truly nutritious**, but not yummy. **Honey is good!**
2. John's **wardrobe** was **animal skins (and probably birds feathers)** -- truly symbolic of his state of displacement. He carried a stuff -- weird by civilized standards.

Emptiness of the heart calls for the **life-changing power of the Word!!** We must **hunger and thirst for redemption**, and **hope** for the **metaphorical Promised Land**.

Displaced people have found the right messenger in John. He calls them to **"Prepare the way of the Lord."**

- All who are in the **wilderness of despair**;
- who have **LIVES TO MEND**;
- who wander in trackless **DESERT wastes** without **WATER**;
- whose **SOULS NEED TO RECONNECT TO GOD**;
- whose **CISTERN needs to be FILLED....**

This is the time to prepare the way of the Lord. Anyone who feels **lost, troubled, deprived, or afflicted** by sin, John guides to repentance and **to Christ, the Life-changing power**. The good news comes to the **afflicted, the heart-broken, those with relationships in need of repair**. Most of all, those who have **lost of touch with their Maker**, no matter how long -- **two years, three, four, or ten** -- whatever length of time.

The Israelites were in the wilderness for **FORTY YEARS**. **Jesus had forty days and forty nights of temptation** in the desert. How many years have you been lost and wandering in the wilderness, whatever that wilderness is? I know that each has their own type of wilderness.

Also, remember, only those **who persevered** thru trials and failures **crossed over into the Promised Land**. Left on our own, some will fail -- not all the Jews **successfully endured the forty years** of wilderness experiences. The **good news is** that John points us to the life-saving Savior. We must come to **a point of reckoning** and repent of our sins. Like David (in Psalm 51), we must turn to God saying:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving kindness.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from all sin.

I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. (Ps51:1ff)

We must **confess our sins openly to God**. Sins **known**, sins **unknown**, **things** we have **done** and **things** we have **left undone**.

Come to Jesus from all your **metaphorical deserts**. **He will baptize you!**
He will drench you with his life changing power, and with the Holy Spirit.

AMEN.