

Unworthy

In the name of him who baptizes us with the Holy Spirit, dear friends in Christ: You've got to hand it St. Mark, he doesn't waste any time beating around the bush. He gets to right the point. His book of the Bible opens with these words: "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." That pretty much sums up everything that follows. He wants to make it clear: this is about Jesus. He *is* the Christ – the long promised Savior of Israel. And *he is the Son of God*. The writers of the other two synoptic Gospels, Matthew and Luke, gradually build up to these essential revelations about Jesus. Not Mark; he puts his cards on the table right up front. He wants you to know what's of first importance from the get go. But then, after stating this, he introduces us not to Jesus, but to his forerunner: the man foretold by the prophets to serve as the Lord's messenger to prepare his way.

In my life, I've learned a lot about the importance of being properly prepared; but never so much as when at the Seminary I served on the moving committee. It was a group of volunteers who helped load or unload moving vans for fellow students. Because of the way the program of instruction is set up, there were always new students coming in, students having completed their second year going out for vicarage, the returning vicars who had another year of schooling to do, and finally the graduates who were heading out for their first calls to serve churches. So guys were coming and going all the time. And about two thirds of the students were second career guys, which means most of them had a wife and kids; so we usually we weren't just moving one person in or out, but whole families with all of their stuff.

And some jobs were a breeze. Unloading someone moving in, for example, was always easier than sending someone out. But when loading for someone who was outbound, preparation is what made all the difference. When things were done right, you'd show up with ten or so guys first thing in the morning to discover the family had everything packed and ready to go. They'd have the rental truck waiting and a big pile of moving blankets standing by. If they had small children, they arranged an offsite babysitter to keep the little ones out of the way. So we'd load up the furniture and appliances, then the boxes, which were all properly labeled; there'd be a cleaning team taking care of the rooms we'd cleared out, and after a few hours the job would be done. By noon the family was happily on their way to their next destination. "Bye, bye. Drive safe. God bless your ministry."

Other jobs, unfortunately, were not so easy. You'd show up to find that Dad was gone to get the truck (if indeed he'd already left), and that mom was just getting the kids out of bed. And they'd all be acting like, "What? We're moving today? Really?" That was a bad sign. There'd be nothing packed or in boxes. At the worst jobs the couple would say, "Oh yeah, boxes! We knew we forgot something!" We'd have to send guys to grocery stores to scrounge for containers. Those jobs were a real pain. We'd have to pack up all the dishes, toys, knickknacks, tools, and who knows what all—and books: seminary students always have a ton of books. And there'd be toddlers in pajamas with breakfast or more disgusting things smeared all over their faces wandering aimlessly around underfoot and invariably standing in the way whenever you were trying to move a heavy load. Total mayhem. True story: on one such job I was quickly tossing all the shoes and other stuff piled up on a closet floor into a box, and I reached into a laundry basket to pick up what I thought were a pair of those big fuzzy house slippers. Turned out to be a pair of live, long haired hamsters. I don't know who was more traumatized, the rodents or me. Anyway, on jobs like that we'd be there until late at night – and

everyone would be getting tired and grouchy. And when the family was finally ready to roll we'd be thinking, "So long. Don't hurry back." My point, though, is that preparation made all the difference.

And the reason I'm stressing this is that we're now at the second Sunday of Advent. And Advent is above all else a time of preparation – preparation to receive the Lord Jesus whose coming into the world to join us in our human misery and to defeat all that causes it we are about to celebrate. It's vital that we take the time to do this preparation. A lot of people want to skip this step. They don't want to sing the depressing Advent hymns in their mournful sounding minor keys or hear the warning cry of John the Baptizer whose voice thunders in the desert. "No", they say, "Let's rush straight to the manger at Bethlehem and worship the newborn King. Give us Christmas now! Let's sing of the Savior's birth!" And then they wonder why when Christmas finally arrives, it seems so anticlimactic and unfulfilling. It's no wonder. By the time Christmas arrives, they are "Christmassed-out" – and all at a very superficial level because their Christmas was this wide [arms apart] and this deep [fingers indicating ½"]. They miss out because they weren't properly prepared. No, in order to meet, receive, and welcome Jesus aright, and to experience the true joy of Christmas, you *must* be prepared.

But unlike those well-prepared families that I mentioned, who did tons of work before the moving crew arrived, when it comes to receiving Jesus, you can't prepare yourself. Instead, you have to be prepared by God. You have to be prepared by God working through the means he has appointed for this task. And John was the man the Lord sent to prepare his way.

And what a strange character John was: choosing for his home the hot, dry, gritty desert some thousand feet below sea level; wearing a coarse, scratchy camel-hair cloak over his stiff leather underpants; subsisting on grasshoppers and foul tasting wild honey – he would have been quite a sight. We know too that he was a Nazirite from birth, which means that he never cut his hair – not once; nor did he ever drink wine, which in that day was essential to celebrations and making merry. All in all, John sure doesn't seem like the kind of guy you'd want to announce the coming of a king. I mean, if this is the king's emissary and representative, what kind of a king is coming? John's austere lifestyle and wild appearance speaks of distress and deprivation. He deliberately avoided the pleasures and comforts that most people seek. If the king's forerunner has such a wretched and joyless life, what kind of kingdom are we to expect?

These are good questions. And to answer them, it's necessary to understand is that everything about John was intended to reinforce and help him preach his message. His strange appearance and his ascetic behavior were meant to underscore and illustrate his even stranger message; a message that would have been unfamiliar and jarring to the ears of most of his hearers – even as it is strange and unwelcome to the vast majority of people in our day. You see, John was a living picture of what a soul troubled by sin should be. His outward appearance displayed the inward misery of a guilty conscience. He showed what a heart burdened with shame and fearful of God's judgment should look and feel like on the inside: hot, dirty, uncomfortable, weary, hungry, thirsty – longing for relief, for cleansing, for rest; looking for comfort – for something to shelter it from the glaring sun of God's Law that mercilessly reveals all the truths about ourselves we'd rather deny or hide.

And to get people to that point, John proclaimed the Law of God with fire with conviction and with authority. He caused people to confront ugly truths about themselves. And people, for the most part, don't like doing that. We'd rather think of ourselves as essentially good. We like to think that while we're not exactly perfect, we're most of the way there. All we need is a little

help, a short boost up, and perhaps some guidance to show us the way, and then we'll be fine. And this is why we'd rather skip the preparation phase and jump straight to the king's arrival at Christmas. We think we are worthy to receive him as we are. We think that he ought to be pleased to have us as his loyal supporters. Certainly that was the prevailing mindset in Israel when John came on the scene. Everyone thought, "We are God's chosen people. We're better than everyone else. Why wouldn't the Lord send the Christ to rule over us and lead us to glory? We deserve it."

John told them otherwise. He uncovered their sins. He pointed out their arrogance, their selfishness, their lack of love – their utter failure to love and trust God above all things, their inability to keep even the smallest of his commands, and their shameful track record of not loving or caring for one another. John made them see the truth. And when he was through, they really did feel on the inside like John looked on the outside. And when that happened, when they were broken and contrite and seeking relief, John gave it to them. He took them into the Jordan River and applied to them a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And he told them, "Now you are ready for the one who comes after me, the one whose sandal strap I am unworthy to untie."

Baptism for Jews was unheard of, by the way. Oh, the Jews in those days had a form of baptism; but it was for Gentile converts to the faith. It represented their new birth as Jews; but no self-respecting Jew – someone who was naturally born a child of Abraham – would ever dream of submitting to such a ritual. The Jews knew they were better than everyone else; that's why God chose them. The Gentiles were dogs to them. For a Jew to submit to baptism would be a denial of that inherent worthiness they had by being born Jews. It would be the ultimate humiliation. And that's the point. By allowing themselves to be baptized by John, they were saying, like the prodigal son, "Because of the way I've been living my life, I am not worthy to be called one of the sons of Israel. It doesn't matter what I was born. I'm just another unworthy Gentile dog. I justly deserve God's wrath and punishment. Lord have mercy on me, a sinner." That's what being prepared to receive Jesus is all about.

And today through this unworthy instrument, the ministry of John to prepare sinners to receive Christ continues. Through me, as he did through John, the Lord calls upon you to do a thorough examination of your life. Borrowing the illustration we heard earlier of preparing for a cross country move, I invite you to go through every room in your spiritual house. Open all the closet doors and cupboards. Look in the basement and attic where the secret and hidden things are stored. Move the furniture that's stood in one place too long so that it's accumulated underneath a thick gray mat of dust bunnies. Shine the bright light of God's Law into every nook and cranny. What will you find?

Consider first your relationship with God. Ask, "Have I been honoring him as I should? Have I been cheerfully attending his Word? Have I been striving to grow in biblical knowledge and wisdom? Have I been faithful in prayer? Do those who look at me see clearly that I am a child of my heavenly Father? Am I through my life and witness bringing honor to the family name?"

Then ask, "What's the status of my human relationships?" If you are married, are you truly loving, honoring, and cherishing your spouse as you should and as you stood before God and promised you would? If you're young ask, "Am I honoring and obeying the parents that God has given me? Am I grateful to God for them? Do I strive to ensure they never have reason to be angry with me?" If you have children, ask, "Am I raising my children as I should, to fear and love God and to be faithful to him? Am I setting the best example I can for them in all

that I say and do?" Then move on to your other relationships, to your friends and neighbors, to each and everyone one of your business colleagues, customers, and co-workers. Are you treating all of them in a Christian way? Freely forgiving their sins against you, praying for them at all times, helping them in their needs to the full extent that you can? And let's not forget strangers in need – or your government officials; you're to respect, obey, and pray for them too. How are you doing? Are you meeting God's perfect standard – God who commands you even to show love to and pray for your enemies?

Lastly I invite you to venture into those places that no one else can see but you and the Lord: examine your heart and mind. Consider your thoughts, your goals, your desires ... are they pleasing to God? Or do you find discontent, evil lusts, selfishness, lack of forgiveness, hardheartedness, resentment, ingratitude, and pride?

I mentioned before that John's mode of dress conveyed part of his message. So does mine. Like most pastors in our churches, the black I wear showcases what's in my heart: nothing but sin. Like John, I am an unworthy servant of Jesus. I'm certain that in my own case, it's accurate to say that I'm a lot less worthy to serve Jesus than John ever was. But my call is to serve the Lord by helping you to prepare to receive Jesus. Hopefully today we've made some progress.

If you see your sin, if you are ashamed of yourself, if you rightly fear God's wrath – if you know that you are unworthy to receive Jesus, then you are prepared. For Jesus comes only to sinners. He comes only to those who know they are unworthy. He comes to those who know that in them dwells no good thing. And Jesus receives them. He takes them into himself. He covers them with his perfect life and righteousness. That's what the white I wear over the black shows: how the unworthiness in you and me is covered by Christ and his worthiness. That worthiness was given to you when you were received by Jesus in Baptism – not into the Jordan River, but into his passion, his death for sin, and his resurrection to new life. And now, every time you confess your sins to God, acknowledging your unworthiness, he covers you again in Jesus and his perfection and he raises you up to live with him.

This is the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Therefore, now and always, let us prepare the way of the Lord and be ready to receive him who receives only the unworthy. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!