

So, is your house ready for Christmas? Do you have the tree up in the living room? Are all the presents under it yet? Are the lights hanging outside, stockings hanging from the mantle, and the nativity scene set up in your living room or on your front lawn? Even if you're not into decorations, I'm guessing there are still ways you have to prepare your home for the holidays. Is the fridge stocked for your Christmas dinner? House cleaned and guest rooms made up for the relatives who are visiting from out of town?

I don't know, maybe you got it all done over Thanksgiving break, so you can just relax heading into the holidays. Or maybe you have a long way to go, and all this talk of getting your home ready for Christmas is stressing you out.

Either way, there's a more important question God has for you this morning: Is your *heart* ready for Christmas? Maybe that's a question you haven't stopped and considered yet this advent season. Maybe you've been too busy with the other Christmas preparations to give it much thought. Maybe you think it's a given that your heart's ready, because you already believe in Jesus.

But God - God wants you to take a trip out to the desert region in Judea this morning and consider it again. We're going to visit John the Baptist - the forerunner that God used to get his peoples' hearts ready to welcome Jesus as their Savior when he made his appearance among them. And 2000 years later, it's still how God gets his people's hearts ready - both to receive Christ at Christmas and when he comes again.

Yes, God is still preparing the way. 1) With a message of repentance, 2) with a message of forgiveness.

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² It is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way” —

³ “a voice of one calling in the desert,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.' ”

⁴ And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

1. *With a message of repentance*

Mark gets right to the point, doesn't he? The intro to his book is not wordy at all. He lets his readers know what we're in for in one verse: This is **the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son**

of God. Gospel – that word means “good news.” And this was the best of news in all history – the news God’s people had been waiting thousands of years to hear – that God the Son came into the world as a man named Jesus to be the **Christ** – the promised Savior from sin.

But...would God’s people be ready to receive him? Would they believe this gospel as the good news it really is when Jesus made himself known, or just brush it aside as unimportant? “A Savior from sin? No, thank you, I don’t have a problem with sin. A Savior from sin? No, thank you, I like my life just the way it is. I have no desire to change my ways.” Such unrepentant attitudes stand like roadblocks between people and Jesus, so God sent John to prepare the way.

And he did it with a message of repentance. **And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.** If John preached in Hebrew, the word would literally mean “to turn:” Turn away from your sins, because God is on his way to keep his promises and that’s the only way to be ready. If John preached in Greek, the word would literally mean “change your mind:” Change your mind about your sins, because God is on his way to keep his promises and that’s the only way to be ready. Whether the word picture is to turn or to change your mind, the message is the same: You can’t hold on to your sin and hold onto Jesus at the same time. He comes to take away your sins, but that will do you no good if you have no intention of letting them go. Repentance is the only way to be ready for Jesus.

And people listened! Mark says, **The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.** But God is still preparing the way with a message of repentance. So maybe the better question to ask is: Am I listening?

When John says I can’t hold on to sin and Jesus at the same time, am I listening? Or are there sins I’m starting to hang on to – sins that I’m not struggling against as much as I used to, sins that don’t bother me like they should, sins that I’m not turning away from like I need to?

Maybe it’s your attitude towards God’s Word. God tells you to be in it often, but “often” for you is once every couple of weeks. And you haven’t done much to change that – you’re okay with that. You pass up opportunities like bible study and devotion without a second thought. This morning, God says to you, “Repent.”

Maybe it’s your impure thoughts. God says he’ll judge all the sexually immoral, but you’re not taking that all that seriously. Sinful sexual thoughts are becoming more and more frequent guests in your heart, and you’re not struggling against them anymore. This morning, God says to you, “Repent.”

Maybe it’s a grudge you’re holding onto. Know God says forgive, but you’re refusing. Or you convince yourself you have...but the way you talk and act toward that person says otherwise.

Maybe the sin you’re beginning to hold onto is self-righteousness. Thinking that you don’t need to visit John the Baptist that often, because well you avoid the big sins, and don’t have nearly as much to repent of as other people. This morning, God says to you, “Repent.”

It’s not very comfortable, is it? It’s a message as rough as John’s camel-hair clothes. But repentance is the only way to be ready for Jesus. Without it, the roadblocks go up in our hearts and make it impossible for Jesus to bring us his blessings. Without it, Christmas becomes

unnecessary, an excuse for time off. Without it, his return becomes a day of wrath. So thank God he's still preparing the way, and listen when he says, "Repent!"

II. With a message of forgiveness

But don't stop listening there. After all, John had more to say. Really, this was the goal of everything he was doing out in the wilderness. His baptism and his preaching of repentance – it was all done with one goal in mind. It was all **for the forgiveness of sins**. Turning away from your sins in sorrow would be of no use if you didn't have someone to turn to who takes those sins away. And John made sure to point people to the Jesus who did.

Can you hear the excitement in his voice as he says it? **After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie**. John practiced the repentance he preached. He was keenly aware that his sins made him unworthy to even stoop down and untie Jesus' sandals. But that made Jesus' coming all the more marvelous. For an unworthy sinner like me, he comes! For unworthy sinners like us, he comes! He comes in humility and weakness, born a fragile baby in Bethlehem. But he comes with the power to do for us what John and you and I could never do for ourselves. He comes to take away sins and make us worthy in God's eyes.

John was already sharing that forgiveness with people – as they stepped into the Jordan to be baptized. God was preparing the way by washing people's sins away, making them worthy to receive their king. So that when Jesus stepped onto the Jordan's banks soon after, John could say: **"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"** And they'd believe it, and rejoice.

God is still preparing the way. He says to you, **"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"** And if he carried the world's sins to the cross and with his sacrifice took them all away, he most certainly took your sins away there, too. He takes you to the font, and assures you that in your baptism he washed all your sins away. He leads you to confess your sins with repentant hearts at the beginning of every service, but always with the goal of sharing with you the best of news: For Jesus' sake, I forgive you all your sins. For Jesus' sake, I count you worthy of my heaven.

Did you ever stop to ask why God had John do his work in the desert? It wasn't just because Isaiah promised it would happen there. It was God's way of pulling people out of all the busyness and distractions of daily life so that they'd focus on the message. Why the camel's hair for clothing? It wasn't just because that was prophet's garb. It was because God didn't want fancy robes to distract people from what John had to say.

This Christmas, don't let busyness of getting your house ready for Christmas distract you from God getting your heart ready. Spend more time out in the wilderness with John. Spend quiet time with his message on your hearts: To turn away from sin. And not only that, but turn to your Savior who has taken it all away. To change your mind: To see that sin surely damns, but more than that, to trust that Jesus surely saves.

Because that's how God still prepares the way. That's how he gets your heart ready to receive Jesus with wonder and joy again this Christmas. That's how he keeps your heart ready to receive him with wonder and joy when he returns. Amen.