

**Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Amen.**

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.<sup>2</sup> It is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”—<sup>3</sup> “a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

<sup>4</sup> And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” **This is the Gospel of our Lord.**

**Dear Friends,**

In our Old Testament lesson this morning God directs Isaiah to bring comfort to his people, **“Comfort, Comfort my people says your God.”** And yet Isaiah wants to know what to cry out to the people – what message should he bring. The answer, **“[The Lord] tends his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.”**

There is a connection between these words of Isaiah and our sermon text this morning from the gospel of Mark. John the Baptist is that connection. As we think about John the Baptist we want to take a look at, **“What is Mark’s Message for Us?” “How is this Message Established by John?”** and **“How is This Message Made Perfect by Christ?”**

**I.** Sometimes you have to read the first four or five chapters of a book before you can figure out what it’s all about. Mark wants us to understand right from the beginning what his message is all about. He begins with the words, **“The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”** This is the “gospel – the Good News – about Jesus Christ.” You might be thinking it’s a biography but it serves a much different purpose than a biography. It is the “good news” we all need to hear. Sinners need a Savior and Mark is telling us, **“HERE HE IS!”**

It’s very easy for us to miss the significance of Mark’s opening statement where he calls Jesus Christ the Son of God. But in using the name Jesus he is telling us this is about your Savior. In using the name Christ connected with Jesus, he is telling us Jesus is the Anointed One. Anointed to be our perfect prophet, priest, and king who alone can bring us salvation. He is the Son of God. Not just any man’s son, but God’s Son because only God’s Son could do everything needed for our salvation. This is the “Good News” that Mark wants us to hear.

Mark then establishes Jesus’ credentials by establishing the credentials of John the Baptist. He begins by telling us that John is the prophet referred to in Isaiah chapter 40 – the prophet who was going to prepare the way for the Savior. When this prophet – John – comes, you can be sure that the Messiah will not be far behind. We’re told about John’s lifestyle, **“[He] wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild**

**honey.”** The Old Testament prophet Elijah was described as, **“A man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist.”** (2 Kings 1:8). That isn’t a coincidence. Jesus, in his ministry would refer to John as “The 2<sup>nd</sup> Elijah.” A prophet of great importance – a prophet we need to pay attention to.

**“And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”** This is a pattern of preaching we still follow today because it is a message we still need to hear. Sometimes people think we spend too much time talking about Repentance and not enough time talking about forgiveness. Some folks think that our sermons should be all Gospel and very little Law if any at all because the Law points out our weaknesses and shortcomings. It makes us feel bad. But the Gospel has a soothing, healing quality that brings us relief and lifts us up. It makes us feel good about ourselves and that’s the emotion we want church to bring us.

I want you to leave church feeling good, but I want you to get that emotional high from seeing the work of your Savior in your life. It’s not the songs, it’s not the choirs, it’s not speaking ability of the preacher – it’s the message that brings us that emotional high. In order for us to reach that high we have to understand how our Savior has pulled us up out of the pit of sin – a place that we tend to fall into every day – and lifted us up into his arms where we feel the love of his heart as he assures us he has taken care of our sins and he will gently guide us through life.

John didn’t just preach forgiveness. He preached a message of repentance followed by forgiveness – a message that continues to apply to us today. Forgiveness follows repentance and not the other way around. Confession prepares the heart for the forgiveness our Savior wants us to have.

You might think that that is a harsh message that no one wants to hear but look at the response to John’s message. He was out in the desert – a desolate, uninviting place – and yet people from Jerusalem and the whole Judean countryside came out to hear his message, to confess their sins, and to be baptized and receive the forgiveness of sins. They had to have what he was offering. They needed that peace and sure hope of salvation in their lives. Before John, they were relying on their own works and that brought no peace at all.

We can fall into the same trap – thinking that we have to do it all and so we carry a tremendous load of guilt because of it and put ourselves under a lot of needless pressure. But John reminds us of what’s most important in our lives – Jesus Christ and the Good news he brings. Prepare your hearts – confess your sins – repent – and receive the forgiveness of sins – the joy and the peace of knowing that you are right with God – and then everything starts to fall into it’s proper place because Jesus Christ makes this message of forgiveness the perfect message for us.

**II.** Many people wondered if John might be the Christ – the Savior they were waiting for. This must have been evident to John or maybe the Holy Spirit enlightened John so that he did not leave them wondering. He said, **“After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”**

John had a powerful message and yet he did not even consider himself worthy enough to perform the duty of the lowliest servant in a household – the duty of removing the sandals of anyone visiting that household and washing their feet. John truly served in all humility. He recognized that he was just a messenger – a tool that God was using to prepare the hearts of the people for someone even greater. John recognized that it was not all about him but it was all about the Savior.

That is why the Bible is centered on Jesus Christ – the message of who he is and what he has done for us. We need to know that Jesus Christ lived a perfect life for each and every one of us – something we find impossible to do and yet something that God demands. We need to know that Jesus Christ made the perfect sacrifice for our sins – the payment of his blood more precious than silver or gold has bought us freedom from the chains of sin. Christ did all these things not only to bring us salvation but to make the work of the Holy Spirit possible. It is the Holy Spirit who takes the perfect life, the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus and brings the forgiveness of sins to the Christian Church which includes each one of us.

The Holy Spirit is just as important to our faith as the work of Christ. John points out that Jesus would baptize us with the Holy Spirit. A vivid reminder of the first Pentecost when the Spirit came on the disciples. A vivid picture of how the Holy Spirit continues to come to us today through the sacrament of Holy Baptism and through God's Word as it is proclaimed throughout our church services – directly in our lessons, psalms and sermon and indirectly in our hymns, prayers and liturgy. Christ makes the message of salvation perfect for each and every one of us through the faith created in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

It is easy for many things to side track us as we prepare for Christmas. It is so easy to lose sight of the real reason to celebrate Christmas and then we get caught up in all the wrong emotions – feelings of depression and bitterness and tiredness and just finding it hard to care.

When John said, **“Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him,”** he was not only talking to the people in the desert, he was also talking to us. As you make preparations to celebrate Christmas, make sure the Lord has a straight path to your heart. Let God's Word help you clear out the obstacles Satan keeps throwing in the way – obstacles that try and block the work of the Spirit.

For our God wants us to understand the message of Mark: Jesus Christ is the Son of God. John the Baptist is the messenger who identifies him as our Savior but it is Christ who makes us perfect and brings us the forgiveness of sins. As we make preparations for Christmas may we always keep Christ at the center of those preparations and may we feel the joy and peace that he brings us in a perfect way. Amen.