

The Second Sunday in Advent (Advent 2B), December 6, 2020

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The Beginning: Repentance and Faith[Isaiah 40:1–11](#); [Mark 1:1–8](#)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet. . . . John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all . . . were going out to him and were being baptized by him . . . , confessing their sins (vv 1, 2, 4, 5).

A good beginning makes a big difference. You know how true this is! If you begin the day by getting up on the wrong side of the bed, or miss your alarm, or skip breakfast, it can ruin the whole day. If you begin solving a math problem the wrong way, you won't get the right answer. And if the beginning of a book or a movie doesn't capture your interest, you'll never make it to the end.

3.

So how does the Gospel of Mark begin? Like this: **"The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet . . ."** (Mk 1:1–2). Matthew begins with a genealogy. Luke begins in the temple. John begins in the very, very beginning before creation itself. But Mark begins with an Old Testament promise that the Lord Himself will come and that a voice will prepare His way: **"Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight'"** (Mk 1:2–3). Mark begins with the voice that prepares us for the coming of the Lord.

Last Sunday we heard that Advent includes three comings of the Lord: His first coming in the flesh, His coming now in word and Sacraments, and His final coming in glory. Even as we prepare to celebrate our Lord's birth on Christmas—His coming in the flesh—we are also being prepared for Him to come again. In the reading from the Second letter of St. Peter, we heard these words: **"The Day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed"** (2 Pet 3:10). When Christ comes in glory, the world will end, the old creation will pass away, and all that is impure and badly begun will burn! In Advent, God

prepares us for this great and dreadful Day of the Lord by sending His messenger, who will prepare the way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness.

The voice cries, **“Prepare the way of the Lord.”** But how? **“Make His paths straight,”** he says (Mk 1:3; Isa 40:3). **“Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain”** (Isa 40:4). This voice engineers a royal highway for the Lord—clearing a straight path, filling in the valleys, tearing down the hills, leveling out the uneven ground, and making the rough places smooth. It’s a divine construction project, a massive work, a marvel, this preparation for the coming of the Lord. It reminds me of the proposal from a few years ago for Boston’s failed bid for the summer Olympics and the huge infrastructure upgrade it would’ve required. It also reminds me of the highways system in our country that cuts across valleys and blasts through hills. Isaiah describes a project like that—a spiritual project of creating the infrastructure for the Lord to come.

2.

That’s what Isaiah promised. Then **John appeared**, the original prepper, with his camel’s hair clothing, leather belt, and diet of locusts and wild honey (Mk 1:4, 6). But the way he prepares you for the coming of the Lord and the end of the world isn’t by encouraging a stockpile of food, water, guns, and ammo. None of those things will help. **John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins** (Mk 1:4–5).

He begins with a call to repentance. People—then *and* now—need to take heed. We need to pay attention. If we would hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, this is where we must begin as well. If we would be prepared for His coming, this is how it starts. Not with an inventory of our supplies or a close look at the pantry but with an inventory of ourselves and a close look at our sin. Let me be clear, this isn’t something we do for Jesus. Repentance isn’t necessary for His sake; He doesn’t need our repentance. So it’s not a work we do for Him or something that we have to show Him, as if proof of repentance will need to be shown when He comes in glory. *We* need repentance. It’s necessary for our sake. It’s necessary so that we clearly see our desperate need for Jesus. If we don’t know our sin, if we aren’t sorry for our sin, what good is His forgiveness? What does forgiveness even mean to the person who says they have no sin? So we cannot be prepared for Christ without a right understanding of our sin.

Of what, then, do we need to repent? Well, where are the valleys and hills in your life? Can you identify the uneven ground within yourself? How many rough places do you have? I can guarantee that the people closest to you have encountered them. Certainly we need to repent of the unchristian ways of thinking, speaking, and acting that we too easily and too frequently slip into. The way of Christ is *not* the same as the way of the world, yet we are deeply influenced by the world's ways. Too often we think like the world thinks—not about the good of our neighbor or what they need or how we to serve them, but about ourselves, our own wants and desires. Too often we speak like the world speaks—gossiping, slandering, cutting others down, telling lies and half-truths to protect ourselves or make ourselves look better than we are. Too often we act like the world acts—watching smut, drinking too much, making innuendos, wasting our time, cutting corners to get ahead, allowing worry to paralyze us. Such things show that we fear, love, and trust in other things and people instead of in God Himself.

When the Lord comes again in glory, we must not be found in sin. That is, we can never make peace with our sin. We are poor, pitiful sinners, yes, but we shouldn't be content with that. We can't use that as an excuse or a justification. Hear the voice crying in the wilderness. What does he cry? **"All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever"** (Is 40:6–8). Follow the voice of John. He called the people of Judea and Jerusalem to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. They came confessing their sins. They come confessing that they are withered grass and fading flowers. What about us? John calls us to return to our baptisms by confessing our sins. He invites us to speak the truth about ourselves, that we, too, are withered grass and fading flowers. He points us to our great need and our inability to help or save ourselves.

1.

This is how He prepares the way of the Lord. Now the Lord has a straight path. Now He can ride in with all His gifts. For the Lord comes not to destroy but to save. He comes not to cut down sinners but to raise them up. **"After me comes He who is mightier than I,"** says John, **"the strap of whose sandals I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie. I've baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit"** (Mk 1:7–8). John points to the One who comes with forgiveness for sinners. John directs attention to the One who brings a new beginning for us whose have begun so poorly. And Jesus comes following path prepared by John. He rides right in. Here comes the comfort, the double comfort, in the forgiveness of sins. Here comes the peace with God that we need. **"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned,**

that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins" (Is 40:1–2). Jesus has more forgiveness than we have sin. This is what our Lord brings as He comes to us on the royal highway.

The way of the Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, led Him into the water of the Jordan River with sinners, and then out of the water carrying the sin of the world to the cross. John prepared the way for Jesus to be the Savior of sinners—bringing forgiveness through His own suffering and death. He comes to you today as the One who went to the cross for you.

So, whether you've begun poorly or well, whether your day started off on the right side of the bed or the wrong side, whether Advent found you prepared or caught you by surprise, you have in Jesus a new beginning and a fresh start. It is yours through Holy Baptism, which washed away all your sins, and through the absolution that declares you forgiven. And this new beginning will reach its conclusion, as St. Peter tells us, **"according to His promise,"** for there will be **"new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells"** (2 Pet 3:13). That will be the end of sin and death.

And it all begins here, like this, through **"the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"** (Mk 1:1). It begins with repentance and faith in Him. God grant it to us now and always!

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
