

Sermon Text for December 9, 2018

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Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8

“Do you have the Spirit?”

I hope last week you left church not being able to wait for the Christ to come back again. Advents needs to stir up that sense of expectancy in all of us. But we noticed that just being excited about the coming of Christ isn't enough, we need to stay awake, and be actively preparing for Christ's coming. Today we are going to see that a part of that preparation is a call to repentance. We need to be aware of our sin, and be prepared to deal with it if we think we are ready for the coming of Christ.

One of the greatest evangelists of all time who brought people face to face with their sin and led them through the process of confession and forgiveness was John the Baptist. Today we are going to look at the first verses of the Gospel of Mark that does not even mention the birth of Christ but rather skips right to John the Baptist and his anticipation of the coming of Christ. Now here was someone who could never be accused of sleep walking in his service to God. In these verses John mentions the fact that Christ will come bringing the Holy Spirit which played a major role in his birth. Think of the virgin birth and the role that the Holy Spirit played there. It was the Holy Spirit who created a child in Mary, a child who was fully God and fully human.

We are going to ask ourselves today, this second Sunday in Advent, if we are ready for the coming of Christ. Has our repentance been sincere, and do we have the Spirit that Christ left for us in order to bring about change in our own personal lives, but also to bring about changes in a society that is not looking forward to the coming of Christ. Imagine how different things would be in our society, in our culture, in our nation if we could say for sure that Christ was coming back in 17 days. How would people change if we knew that was the case? Today for Advent we are going to ask if we have the Spirit that we need to bring about a change in our lives and in the life of the community.

READ SCRIPTURE

The Gospel of Mark starts in a way that should be very familiar to all of you. In the beginning...Remember the Gospel of John and Genesis. But you should think that if Mark wanted to truly start at the beginning he would do what Luke, Matthew, and John had done that was to actually start at the beginning of the life of Christ. But Mark is not

concerned about the beginning of the life of Jesus Christ as a person, but rather the beginning of the good news. Mark's writings are about the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ which is different than a biography of his life. Look at vs. 1 and you read that this Mark's objective.

What is the good news about Jesus Christ? This term comes from the Greek *euaggelion* that gives us the word Gospel. But Gospel should never be understood as merely a book in the Bible. It means, instead, glad tidings. This writing tells us the glad tidings of Jesus Christ. This term Gospel, good news, glad tidings, was used as a term to describe the message that a courier brought to the village to tell of a military victory. This was a very specific, technical term that could mean military victory. So in essence this could be translated as "The beginning of the victory of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. So right from the start we know how we are going to hear how God has won through Jesus Christ. Do we have the Spirit to discern the victory, this good news of the salvific act of Christ in our lives and in the community? I could go on and on on this one verse, but there is more. But it is one of the greatest first verses of any book of the Bible, next to John's in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. That is greatest first verse of any book of the Bible in my humble estimation.

Mark takes a step to refer to the prophet Isaiah who foretells of this victory by sending a message to proclaim it. But we have a problem here that the people in Jesus' day would have known, but we have to discover. In Isaiah 40 this morning we read the voice of one...Where does this see I am sending you a messenger ahead of you come from? Look at Malachi 3:1. This is where the first part of the quote comes from. Then it gets even more interesting. Read that whole first verse in Malachi 3. The Lord will come to his temple. Now the temple of the Lord is in Jerusalem, right? So in order to hear God, feel God's spirit, experience God, where do you have to go according to Malachi? To Jerusalem. But not according to Isaiah. Where is the voice of the Lord coming from? The wilderness. In fact look back at Mark and you see people from all the Judean countryside and Jerusalem, and Jerusalem where the temple was, leaving those areas and going away and out to the wilderness to hear God's voice.

This wilderness, that was basically uninhabited, desolate, marginal, where people went to seek refuge and some communities escaped to be away from society. Mark begins the Good News of salvation not in the temple, not in a manger, not even in a traditional place of where you would expect to find God like a local synagogue. But the

voice of the Lord comes from the wilderness. The wilderness where when you go to Israel you get to see first hand, last time we even camped out in the wilderness in a Bedouin tent, the highlight of some of our experiences, and the lowlite for others. But it is barren, it is arid, it is dusty, there is no essence of life there. Rather the opposite seems to be the case. There God's messenger excited the people to the point that they could feel God's Spirit even in the midst of desolation. Do we feel that Spirit today in this cozy, beautiful, full of life sanctuary that over the generations has provided life and has been a gathering place for those with life? This is more like the temple than it is the wilderness.

John the Baptist, you've gotta love him. Mark spends an entire, precious verse speaking about the fashion statement that he makes, describing to us what he is wearing, and what he eats. But this is not just a cursory description. If I were to describe someone who had a long white beard, and a red suit you would know who that was. Or if I described someone with a gaunt face, a black beard, very tall and with an even taller stovetop hat, you would know who I am talking about. Well read in II Kings 1:8, this is a description of Elijah. The person reading or hearing the Gospel of Mark in Jesus' day would have understood this prophet, this John the Baptist, as being Elijah. The very same prophet who was to appear to foretell the coming of the messiah. This is absolutely crucial. This is not just John the Baptist the black sheep of Jesus' family, the one who lived an eccentric life style. But this is the prophet Elijah telling the good news of salvation that has come to the earth.

The people of Israel were hungry for a prophet. The Hebrew writings of that day speak of a longing to hear God's voice powerfully as in the days of the prophets. The people reacted to and soaked in John's call. John, if you notice, didn't preach. He announced. He announced very simply that we are called to repent and be forgiven for the kingdom of God is at hand. He brought a message of repentance and forgiveness. We could spend an entire sermon on just these two words repentance and forgiveness. Suffice it to say that repentance means literally to change our mind, to change our heart, basically to change our lives. John is calling us to change our lives. John was a messenger who couldn't wait to see the Christ but he told people about it. Do we have the Spirit, the Spirit to be a messenger of repentance and forgiveness in a time when vengeance is called for.

In our young couples' Sunday School class we asked the question at one time: what difference does our relationship to Jesus Christ make in our life? What change have

we made in our lives because of our relationship to Jesus Christ? If a relationship with Jesus demands repentance, then from what have we repented. If a relationship with Jesus demands that we adjust our thinking and our way of being, how has it been adjusted? These are all Advent, John the Baptist type questions, but they are fair.

At the end of these verses in Mark we hear John speak for the final time. When he speaks he tells us that he is not the glad tidings. He tells us that he is not the victory in Christ Jesus. But rather God's spirit is. In other writings, specifically the Gospel of John 3:30, we hear John the Baptist say I must decrease and he must increase. Here John states that he is not worthy, not even to loosen the thong of his sandal. John is saying he is not even worthy to be his slave.

His final words in the entire Gospel of Mark are "I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit." I can clean the outside, but Jesus will clean your heart, mind, soul, and body. Remember Peter's words wash not only my feet but my whole body. When Jesus baptizes, when Jesus takes hold of your life, true repentance and forgiveness ensues and he gives you his Spirit to live by. Do you have the Spirit?

Jesus, when he first walked upon this earth, came bringing the Holy Spirit. That transforming agent in our lives and in our society. In John 20 we see him breathe the Spirit upon his disciples after he has been resurrected from the dead. We no longer have to wait for this Spirit. The question do we have the Spirit should be answered with a resounding yes. In the Old Testament we see God leaving the Spirit with those who have something to do for God. We see Gideon, and Joel, who prophesies the Spirit on our sons and daughters. We see Isaiah where God says I have put my Spirit in my messenger.

If we feel like the Spirit is being drained from us then the only one to blame is yourself. God has given us God's Spirit. No one can remove that from us. This Advent we need to reclaim that Spirit which tells the good news, the victory that we have in Christ Jesus. We need to have a Spirit of expectancy, of repentance and forgiveness. We need to have a Spirit that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Get the Spirit. Amen.