

# Sermon Text for December 6, 2020

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

*Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8*  
*“Advent and baptism”*

Welcome back to this second Sunday in Advent, a time in the year that we all anticipate and look forward to because it reminds us that it is beginning to look a lot like Christmas. Last week we spoke about the season of Advent and how in seasons there are changes and sometimes we look forward to and anticipate those changes. That is especially true for Advent. We all look forward to the coming of Christmas when we can retell the birth narrative.

I began this week with both the preschool kids and now today with our own children here at church, to give out the nativity pieces that we give out every year. Jeff Stoltzfus puts them together for us and we have made quite a collection over these past 10 years. This is our 10<sup>th</sup> Christmas together. Christmas might be the most anticipated day in the Christian year both in the church and in society. So today in our journey in the lectionary we are looking at the Gospel of Mark. Mark does not contain the Christmas story. Why in the world would we choose a Gospel that doesn't even give us the story of the birth of Jesus?

Our goal here at First Presbyterian is to make each of us more mature in Jesus Christ as Colossians 1:28 states. So how do we do that? How do we grow in our faith? Both of our Scriptures underline a time of preparation for each of us which includes words that we ought to know such as confession, repentance, forgiveness, grace. Today as our sermon includes baptism in its title we also take part in one of the most intimate acts that we could as we celebrate the sacrament of communion. This Sunday as we prepare for the coming of Christ we declare our devotion to Jesus as our Lord and Savior and our devotion to each other as we belong to the same family looking to grow and mature in Christ.

We do that in communion, but we also do that in our congregational meeting as we elect officers who we say as a congregation that these are men and women of faith, even sinners like we all are, who have been called to lead us into this maturity in Christ after which we all strive. Baptism is the beginning of that journey toward maturity. All those who are called to serve have been baptized. All those who take part in communion are encouraged to be baptized as well. Baptism is the starting point for our Advent season of expectancy. Let's read.

## **READ**

Isaiah is the most classic of all Old Testament books of the Bible for the Advent season. We use this prophet more than any other because he was speaking to the people of Israel in a

time when they were taken away in captivity, the most difficult time in the history of the people of Israel. He assures them throughout his writing that the day will come when they will be able to reenter and occupy their land again. They will be in the favor of the Lord once again. That is why this chapter begins the way that it does. Comfort, comfort my people. I have good news, Isaiah says, your time of trial is over. As a result of your time of trial being over, prepare ye the way of the Lord. He is coming.

That is our Advent message. But it can also be a message that we can take to heart in the midst of our pandemic. Comfort, comfort my people, the time of our trial will soon be over. It isn't over now, but it soon will be over. As a result prepare the way of the Lord, get ready for when it will be over. Our reading in Isaiah 40 may sound familiar. These are the words that Handel used for some of his Messiah piece.

At the center of this Advent message is the work that the Lord does so that we can be ready for his second coming. God takes the initiative to come with might, vs.10, to feed his flock, gather his lambs. This central initiative by God is where we find ourselves when look be ready for his coming. God's initiative opens the door for our action, according to Isaiah.

That brings us to Mark. 5 times in these verses that we read, which begins the Gospel of Mark to us, mentions the term baptism. You have to address baptism when the Scripture addresses it. If Isaiah is the most classic of Old Testament Scriptures that addresses Advent and that we hear about during the Advent season, so John the Baptist is the most classic of New Testament characters that we read about and that we discuss during the Advent season. So today we are looking at the two most classic personalities as we find ourselves in the middle of Advent.

John the Baptist is an interesting character. We've covered him a lot. But let's talk about his specifically in relationship to baptism. He was a rabbi, just like Jesus, who had his own disciples. The region that he covered was the wilderness region where the river Jordan ran through. When you hear wilderness think more desert than forest. Think of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness or King David hiding in the wilderness from Saul.

People from all walks of life, look at vs.5, those from the country, farmers, and those from the city, every single one of them came to John to be baptized. Now, keep in mind, you were not to go to the temple, you were not to go to church unless you were washed clean. There is still that custom in Islam. Outside every mosque you have spigots lined up where those who are about to go into the mosque, into God's presence, can wash their feet and their arms so that they are pure before God. That was John's task. People came to him to be washed clean for the day so that they could enter the temple and worship correctly.

That washing would need to be repeated every time that you stepped into church. Can you imagine if we required every person not only to wear mask but to wash up before you came to church? So John baptized people so that they would be prepared to meet God in the temple, in the church. Jesus, on the other hand, baptized people so that they would be prepared for life. Let's look at that closer. John's first words in Mark lead people away from him and toward Jesus. Vs.7 and 8: John proclaimed...

The baptism that we receive is not a result of our own initiative, but rather is the initiative of the one who will baptize us so that we are prepared for life by the Holy Spirit. In the midst of all the disagreements about baptism our belief is not that repentance and conversion must come first, but rather that the presence of God comes first which is why we baptize babies. Calvin said: "Repentance is not placed first, as if it were the ground of forgiveness of sins, or if it induced God to begin to be gracious to us." God has been gracious to us from the day of creation and Jesus himself manifests that grace to us that even while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. That is at the heart of baptism, and also at the heart of communion.

We celebrate the initiative of God in Advent, we also celebrate it the first Sunday of the year in our covenant renewal service where we profess that we are sinners and we reclaim our baptismal covenant with God. Advent marks the coming of Jesus Christ into human history and that it will happen again. Do you believe that? Baptism is the beginning of that journey to receive Christ as mature Christians now and when he comes back again.

Repentance is key to preparation for the Lord's coming. Repentance, baptism, and forgiveness of sins belong together. This is crucial to understand in Advent. Today, we continue our journey with the Lord's Supper realizing that we are asked if we are ready for Jesus coming among us. This past Thursday we spoke about measuring our spiritual maturity and how do we go about doing that? Do we measure it by how many people we led to Christ, do we measure it by how many hours we spent reading the Bible, or praying. Do we measure it by how many meals we have given out and how much money we have given to the church or to those in need?

How do you measure your relationship to Jesus? The beginning of that journey begins with baptism. Advent reminds us that we have been called into Christ's family through baptism and we need to live into that life in maturity. Amen.