

Sermon Text for December 10, 2023

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8 *“Preparing ourselves for God”*

It is hard to believe that in two weeks we will be gathering to celebrate five services together on Christmas Eve. We have been preparing for this with the decorations. The children have been preparing for the pageant, your worship committee has been preparing so that those who come to church will experience the living presence of Jesus and that each person will be faced with a desire to follow Jesus more closely. A lot goes into preparing this body for this time of year beyond what you see in the trappings and in the beauty.

As a fellowship we have been preparing ourselves and training ourselves with our Prayer and Scripture and action. Yesterday we had another outstanding day of prayer led by Carole Turano. We will have more opportunities for this. If you have not taken part yet in Being in the presence I can't encourage you enough to come and take part in it. It is simply a time to pray together as a family. What can be threatening about that? But in order to be prepared for the coming of Jesus, which we all want to be, it does take training and that is what we have been trying to do throughout this whole time in PSA.

I would guess that most of us are not in any kind of spiritual shape in our relationship with Jesus. Now, granted we are all at different places in our training, some of us could run a spiritual marathon, others of us would have a hard time walking around the block, spiritually that is. But each one of us is in this, every single person counts, you can't sit this one out. Jesus is going to want to be with you and he will be asking for you to be with him when he comes back. So our lives aren't opportunities to sit back and come what may, in Advent we proclaim with certainty that Jesus is coming back and that is the case that he is coming back for all of us so all of us have to be ready.

John the Baptist is one of the primary figures of Advent. When churches talk about Advent John the Baptist is inevitably one of the people who gets mentioned and is a topic of at least one of the sermons, like us today. The Scripture says that he came to prepare the way of the Lord, in order to make people ready for the coming of Jesus the first time around. He prepared the people by bringing them to repentance, this Scripture says. He confronted them with their sin, they repented, he baptized them, and then, in theory, they were to be ready for Jesus.

We live in a time where I kind of feel like a John the Baptist and all of those prophets that went before him. We should all feel that way if we are connected to this church in any way shape or form. We are called to ensure that this world is ready for Jesus to come back, because we do believe that he is coming back. In many ways I am to be your trainer so that you are ready to meet Jesus. Let's get in spiritual shape by reading Scripture.

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Anytime that we bury a member of the church I can't help but think of the frailty of life and the reality that what we do here together actually matters and means something. We buried Charlie Lefever on Thursday. Charlie and I had a long history together from the moment I stepped into this church 13 years ago and he offered me ham loaf that he had made. You need to know that I love ham loaf, had never heard about it until he offered it to me, but I loved it and he quickly won my heart. I took Charlie on a mission trip 12 years ago to Russia, we went on a mission trip to West Virginia together. He was the worship committee chair when I came here and he was instrumental in starting our contemporary service. Charlie and I lived life together.

Even though the end of his life came suddenly, Charlie knew Jesus and he was ready to be with Jesus when he was resurrected. Turn with me to II Timothy 4:6-8, read, The Apostle Paul knew that he was going to die and he is writing to his "son" Timothy and he wants to leave him with one last legacy. He leaves him with the legacy of demanding that he be ready for the coming of Jesus. I have fought the good fight, I have run the race, I have kept the faith. No matter what is happening in your life Timothy, no matter how crazy your family may be right now, no matter how lonely you may be feeling as a single person right now, no matter how bewildered you might be because of your troubling medical condition, keep the faith. Be ready. Paul was prepared for the coming of Jesus when he was writing this and he was telling Timothy, he is telling us to be ready as well.

As Paul was in the last stages of his life, Isaiah also speaks about the frailty of life. Look at vs.7-8 where we read these familiar verses. For Isaiah, who was surrounded by death on all sides, it is clear that death prepares us for God. Isaiah tells us to stand firm on that which does not dissipate and disappear over time, the Word of the Lord. What are you leaning on in this time in your life that might be taken from you tomorrow? Isaiah reminds us that a way in which to be ready for the coming of Jesus is to stand firm on that which is unchanging, and there is only one thing that doesn't change or shift, Great is Thy faithfulness, Great is Thy faithfulness, morning by morning new mercies I see, there is no shadow of turning with thee.

John the Baptist came from a long line of God's messengers, like Isaiah, whose task it was to prepare the people of God, to prepare us for the coming of the Lord. The Gospel of Mark begins with the ministry of John the Baptist before he gets to Jesus. But Mark begins like the Gospel we saw last week, John and like the first book of the Bible, Genesis. The beginning, that is a very good place to start. This beginning, for Mark, is not creation, but rather the beginning of the Son of God, of Jesus our Savior.

We read that John was in the countryside at the Jordan river baptizing. He was so popular, look at vs.5 and people from the countryside and the cities, all of them, were coming to him. He was the Taylor Swift of the prophets, so popular that people were absolutely streaming to him. We also read in verse 6 that he was unique, he was clothes with camel's hair, leather belt, ate locusts and wild honey. But he did fit the prophet bill. Look at II Kings 1:8 and Elijah was described as having a belt and he was hairy like camel's hair. Zechariah 13:4 describes the prophet as having a hairy mantel. So John fits the bill of a prophet, the people knew who he was.

The people also heard from him clearly what his purpose was. He was here so that he could prepare us. But how did he prepare the people for Jesus? Look at vs.4 and we see the term repentance. He demanded that the people of God repent of their sins. What is this repentance that we read here and how does it apply to us? The Greek word for repentance is metanoia which means to change one's mind or to turn around and go the other way. Repentance is more than sorrow or remorse, it includes the reorientation of your entire life. When you repent of your sins you don't just apologize, you metanoia, you turn your life around and go the other way, you go completely the others way.

Let's also be clear here. Repentance is not first. Some of us may think that unless we repent we will not experience the goodness of God. Repentance is not grounds for forgiveness of sins, as if it somehow induces God to begin to be gracious to us. Repentance is a gift from God and it comes first as we see with Jesus on the cross. Repentance is the way in which we prepare for the coming of Jesus. Advent is a season where we are called by John the Baptist to prepare through repentance, this is how we prepare ourselves.

When was the last time that you repented of your sin? Again, not so that you can have eternal life. Jesus has given us that gift already, but rather when was the last time that we repented of our sin so that we can be ready for when Jesus takes our hand and leads us away from this earth. Because John tells us here in this Scripture that this is how we are to begin to get

ready. This is part of our training, Prayer, Scripture, Action, and Repentance. When was the last time that we metanoia, turned away and went completely the other way from our sin?

So John in these verses was doing what he was called to do, that voice that called from the wilderness to prepare people for the coming of the Lord. He was the spiritual trainer getting people into spiritual shape in order to meet Jesus. Our true preparation for Advent is not found in what we see around us, but rather what we see within us as we prepare for Jesus' coming.

It is time to train people. While Christmas is only two weeks away, the rest of our lives are in front of us. It has to begin with a turning away which can only happen when we realize that Jesus is Savior, that this baby born in a manger was born for every single one of us. That is already a done deal, now we have to live into that. Let's prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord. Amen.