

The title for today's message is: **What is Repentance**

Isaiah the prophet wrote: ***“Behold...‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”***

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

Let us pray: Dear Heavenly Father, during this season of Advent, as we begin to celebrate anew the good news of your saving grace in Jesus Christ, open our hearts to Your word by the power of your Holy Spirit. Help us to hear with new ears what the Scriptures proclaim, and empower us to respond with renewed faith in your gift of redemption. This we ask in Christ's holy name. Amen.

Advent, being the first season of the Church's liturgical calendar, we begin anew to tell the Good News of God's redemption in Jesus the Christ.

Now Mark's Gospel is considered, by most Biblical scholars, to be the first of the canonized stories of the life of Jesus Christ.

It also has the distinction of being the shortest of the stories. So as a result, Mark doesn't waste any time getting to the heart of his message.

Mark doesn't begin with stories of our Lord's ancestry, or painting for us a description of our Lord's birth.

Nor does he describe the significance of our Lord's incarnation. Mark simply opens his Gospel with the words: ***“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”***

Now, in his opening sentence, he tells us that God has come among us to bring to fruition God's promised redemption.

He then quotes from the prophet Isaiah, reminding everyone that God promised to send a messenger to prepare the way of the Lord.

And in just the fourth verse of his Gospel, in strides John the Baptist, who, to our modern senses, appears to be some sort of weirdo.

Just picture the scene if you will. Out along the Jordan River, in the midst of the barren Judean Mountains, stands this man.

A man with long hair and a beard that hasn't been combed or brushed in days. He's dressed in animal skins, and eating locusts dipped in wild honey.

And as he walked up and down the river, he shouted out in his gruff voice, Repent!, and once the crowds gathered, he began to preach God's Word.

Now, the image that we today have of John the Baptist is shocking to us, because of his weirdness.

And the image of John the Baptist was also shocking to the people who went out to hear him preach, but not for the same reason.

The description of John the Baptist is intended, not to excite the reader's fascination with the bizarre, but to jolt them with a memory.

John is not an exotic man; and actually his clothing is not outlandish; they are the clothing of the past prophets, such as the prophet Elijah.

Right from the beginning of Mark's Gospel, he describes the role of John the Baptist as one who stepped out of the pages of the Old Testament, into the pages of the New.

His role was clearly defined by the history of a community which were striving to live in a relationship with God.

He was to prepare the way for God's anointed, and the new kingdom which God's Son would establish.

Now, according to Mark's Gospel, the way to prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ the Son of God into our midst.

And to enter into a new relationship with God, was to repent. That's right repent, just as we do to this day.

Now, some people think of repentance as something, that just naturally happens to us as we move through the journey of a Christian life. Not so!

Look, the repentance that John preached involves much more than a mid-course correction to our lives, or turning over a new leaf.

The repentance that John preached calls for us to look behind before we dare to move ahead.

It calls for us to encounter the past that we have lived, but not fully experienced, before we enter a future we do not yet comprehend.

I believe that John, wearing the clothing of an old prophet, embodies the history of God's people.

It proclaims all that God has done for us, things that we certainly did not fully understand.

It also proclaims all that God has said to us in our memory, which we didn't fully believe. All of which pointed to the coming of the Messiah.

The repentance that John preached also requires the Holy Spirit enabling us to see ourselves in the midst of God's ongoing plan for our redemption.

And it can be described in this way: Whenever we return to an old and well-worn passage in the Bible and do not force it to say what we expect it to say.

But through the power of God's Spirit allow it to encounter us anew, creating new and demanding possibilities for our lives, we have repented.

Whenever we relive some experience in our memory, and discover, in our remembrance.

That there is even more evidence of the hand of God at work than we first thought, more signs of the grace of God than we ever knew, we have repented.

And if, through that experience, the Spirit of God moves us to find in ourselves the will to live a different, more faithful tomorrow because of what we have discerned, yes! we have indeed repented.

Whenever we return to the faith we have been given, to the Gospel we have heard so often, and to the stories which have been told again and again.

And through the power of God's Spirit, and find it not to be a retreat, but a renewal of our lives, then yes, we have repented.

And whenever we discover that all that God has done for us in our common yesterdays, has been pointing us anew to Christ Jesus.

Who comes to us now to forgive our sins and make possible a new life of faith, then again we have answered God's call to repent.

Another words, the repentance that John the Baptist preached, is rooted in the ongoing grace of God, reaching out to us through the power of God's Holy Spirit.

Helping us to overcome doubt and fear, by inviting us into a relationship with Jesus Christ our Lord.

May God's Spirit so work within each of us, this Advent season, and throughout all the days of our lives.

I now close with Luther's Prayer of Repentance: "Behold, Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled. My lord, fill it.

I am weak in faith; strengthen thou me. I am cold in love; warm and make me fervent that my love may go out to my neighbors.

I do not have a strong and firm faith; at times I doubt and am unable to trust Thee altogether.

O Lord, help me. In Thee I have sealed the treasure of all I have. I am poor, Thou art rich and didst come to be merciful to the poor.

I am a sinner; thou are upright. With me, there is an abundance of sin, in Thee is the fullness of righteousness.

Therefore I will remain with Thee whom I can receive, but to Whom I may not give."

Amen.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all. Amen.