

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, December 10, 2023 // Advent 2, Year B

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Background and general observations

Mark's Gospel, the shortest of the four canonical Gospels, opens with the stark declaration of “good news.” There is a sense of urgency and immediacy about this Gospel. Here is the beginning of something you have hoped and longed for, “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Mark then connects this good news to prophecy from Isaiah – this has been in preparation for a long time – and Mark shows how an exceptionally popular preacher, John the baptizer, has come on the scene in fulfillment of this prophecy, preparing the way for the bearer of this exceptionally good news. And although John himself was tremendously popular, with all of Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside coming to hear him, John makes it clear that if his hearers think of him as a powerful figure, they haven't seen anything yet.

The description of John the baptizer would likely conjure up the figure of Elijah. (See 2 Kings 1:8) Elijah marked the end of all prophecy, until the coming of the Messiah, and his appearance now would heighten expectations about God breaking into the world. John's role is to prepare the way for this in-breaking of the Divine, and he fulfills his role not only by proclaiming that something powerful is about to happen, but also by preaching the importance of repentance and baptizing people for the forgiveness of their sins. As we move deeper into the season of Advent, a season of preparation, this Gospel passage invites us to consider the possibility of “good news” on the horizon of our lives, the importance of preparing ourselves for this good news, and the magnitude and urgency of what Mark's Gospel so breathlessly announces.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Mark begins his Gospel eager to share “the good news” of Jesus Christ. Yet, some people who have been reared as Christians do not necessarily think of Jesus as “good news.” Some people, in fact, have grown up with a sense that Jesus is often bad news, that he is a judgmental and disapproving figure. When they did something wrong as children, for example, a parent might have said, “What a terrible thing you've done! What would Jesus say about that?” The implication, of course, is that Jesus would be sorely disappointed in the child, and the child thus grows up with an image of Jesus as a stern and disapproving figure.

Is Jesus “good news” for you? If so, how is Jesus good news for you?

If someone who did not know much about Jesus were to ask you about him, would you be eager to tell this person how Jesus is good news for him or her, also? How would you describe, in a nutshell, “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”?

2. What do you know about repentance and forgiveness in your life?

Think of a time when you sincerely repented, or made an important spiritual turnaround in your life.

Think also of a time when you have experienced deep down, unequivocal forgiveness.

Why do you think repentance and forgiveness of sins might be such important preludes for a deeper spiritual life? How is it that repentance and forgiveness of sins allow a person to perceive the Presence and activity of God more clearly in his or her life?

3. What might be blocking or getting in the way of the Divine in your life?

In this season of Advent, how might you benefit from a careful examination of your life and a willingness to repent, in order to prepare the way for God to come through to you more powerfully and clearly?

4. Why is it significant that John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness?

Consider your own experiences of “wilderness.” How can times of wilderness, desolation, and dryness be especially rich and meaningful in the spiritual life?

How are wilderness times helpful in preparing you to see God and your life more clearly? Have you ever had a sense that God seems to show up in particularly powerful ways in your wilderness? When have you experienced important messages coming to you in your times of wilderness? Yet, what do you know about trying to avoid or get out of the wilderness? What does it take to be more non-anxiously present to your times of wilderness, trusting that God might be even closer to us here than on our mountain tops?

5. Who has been a John the baptizer person in your life, someone who has helped to prepare the way for God? How did this person minister to you?

Have you been John the Baptist for someone else?

How can we “prepare the way for God” for each other?

6. Preparing for the holidays and preparing the way for God are often two very different things. At this time of year, our culture and media give us plenty of tips and promptings to prepare for the holidays, but we often do not have nearly the same support and encouragement to prepare for a deeper spiritual life.

If you are in a small group, talk with each other about the challenges you face in observing a holy Advent and Christmas. Are you sensing some opportunities to be more spiritually intentional about this season, without coming across as a Grinch? How can you encourage and support each other as Christians during the holiday season? Consider how your witness of spiritual attentiveness might be an inspiration to others who, deep down, long for something deeper and more lasting than the usual holiday tinsel and cheer.



Would you like to receive the Weekly Bible Study each Sunday afternoon by email? Scan the code to be taken to the online sign-up.