

“Do as You Are Told”
December 10, 2023
Pastor John Mars

This is the day that the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church! Second Sunday of Advent already, can you believe it? Two more and we're at Christmas! Today we're looking at John the Baptist, the book of Mark, chapter 1, verse 1.

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way”—

“a voice of one calling in the desert,

‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made out of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” May God bless the reading of His Word.

I bet I am not the only one who has said they were sorry and didn't mean it. As adults, sometimes we say we are sorry, but we're really sorry that we got caught. Our gospel today is from the Gospel (the good news) according to Mark. I love all four gospels. My favorite is the Gospel of John because it was probably the last gospel written. The theology is more developed, and there's a lot of commentary in it and a lot of deep theology, and I love that. But I think Mark is my second favorite, because there's no fluff and puff and stuff in Mark. It is just the facts: This is what Jesus said; this is what He did. There's not any explanation. There's no commentary. I refer to it often as the “Dagnet Gospel.” Now, most of you out there are old enough to remember Dagnet. Dagnet was a detective show. And when somebody would start elaborating on something that happened, Sergeant Friday would go, “Whoa, whoa. Just the facts, ma'am. Just the facts.” And that is the Gospel of Mark. He doesn't worry about the birth narrative. He doesn't worry about the early childhood of Jesus. He starts with John the Baptist, when Jesus and he both were somewhere around 30 years of age.

Now, I got my faith beginning in the Baptist Church. The Baptist Church is where I accepted Christ. The Baptist Church is where I learned a deep and abiding appreciation for the Scriptures. It was in the Baptist Church that I was called to preach. And it was in the Baptist Church that I got my first master's degree in a Baptist seminary. And I pastored Baptist churches for seven and a half years. So, I think I am very qualified to say: John the Baptist was not Baptist! John the Baptist was a baptizer. John's goal was to prepare people to meet Jesus Christ. If that sounds familiar, that is because that is our goal, too. Our mission is not that complicated. Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ always, but especially during the Advent season. During the Advent

season, we are preparing ourselves for the Second Coming of Christ and looking back on His First Coming. Our goal was John's goal. We begin by preparing ourselves.

You know, it's very easy this time of year to be caught up in all the stuff and miss the season. Our first goal is to prepare ourselves, so that we won't miss the wonder and the joy that is the Advent season. Then we can help others prepare. Our world is in need of some good news, amen? Our world needs the good news that we have. This is a season of waiting, of watching, and of preparing. This was God's plan from the very beginning of time. This is not something new. Jesus and John were not afterthoughts. And we know that. We know that John was a part of God's plan. We know that Jesus was a part of God's plan. But did you know that you and I are part of God's plan? You and I have the privilege of helping other people understand the glory of this time of year. John announced God's plan. He came preaching a repentance, a baptism of repentance.

I want to pause here for just a moment. Start with baptism. The Jews were very familiar with baptism. They had been baptizing for hundreds of years by this time. When anyone wanted to join the Jewish faith, they went through a time of instruction. If they were male they were circumcised, and then they went through another period of instruction. And at the end of this very intensive time of learning, they were baptized. Now this wasn't just a sprinkling. This wasn't just a dunk in the river. This was a thorough washing they underwent. And it was said that they washed away the old person so thoroughly, that they could marry a relative and it wouldn't count. Now, we laugh, but they believed that. That person was a new human being. But with John, there was a twist. You see, the Jewish people believed that didn't apply to them. They were the descendants of Abraham; they didn't need to repent. And John said, "Hogwash! Everyone needs to repent. If you are going to prepare yourself to meet the Messiah, everyone needs to repent." He preached a repentance of sin for everybody.

And I think we all know now what repentance means: "Stop doing the wrong thing and start doing the right thing." It's actually a Greek military command. If a general on the battlefield yelled to his troops, "Repent!", there were three things they would do. They would stop going the direction they were going, and they would turn around and go in the opposite direction. In English it is three commands: "Halt. About face. Forward march." Stop doing the wrong thing; start doing the right thing. John preached a baptism of repentance for everyone, beginning with self. We have a saying in the South: "You can't get saved until you get lost." In order to address an issue in our life, we must first acknowledge it exists. If we don't acknowledge it exists, if we don't acknowledge that it is a problem, we cannot address it. It begins with self. Sometimes, we must also address the party that we have offended. Sometimes this is not possible or practical or feasible. Maybe it doesn't involve someone, maybe it's just the attitude of ourselves. But we must address ourselves before we can help other people.

You know, I've shared this before and I apologize for the three or four of you who remember it, but it made a real impact on my life years ago. I'm not a shopper. I detest shopping, but from time to time I do. I found myself at a mall during the Christmas season one time, and there was a beautiful lady that got on the elevator with me. She had two kids in tow. She had a whole bunch of packages under her arms. Both the kids were whimpering. And she looked right at me, and she said, "I hate Christmas! And I will be so glad when this season is over." And it absolutely broke my heart because here's this beautiful woman, who has two beautiful children, who has all of this stuff, and she

has no joy. None. We've got to help ourselves before we can help others. Repentance is not just saying, "I'm sorry."

John was effective because he lived his message. His life and his message were consistent. The place that he lived, the clothes that he wore, the food that he ate, proclaimed His absolute devotion to God, his absolute devotion to his message, his absolute devotion to preparing people to meet Jesus Christ. He was effective because he told the truth. Somewhere, deep down inside, the Jewish people also knew they needed to change their lives and change their hearts. He was effective because people recognized God in him. There had not been a recognized, prophetic presence in Israel for 400 years. But when John came preaching a baptism of repentance, they recognized God in him, and they flocked to him in droves. He was effective because he was humble. He did not accept the accolades for himself. He pointed people to Jesus Christ as someone beyond himself, someone of whom he said, "I am not worthy to stoop down and untie his sandals." If we are going to be effective in proclaiming God's good news this Advent, it begins with ourselves.

Is there something that is keeping us from understanding, from enjoying, from celebrating this time of year? If there is, we need to repent. We will be effective if our lives proclaim our message, if we embody the good news. We do not have bad news for people; we have good news for our world. We will be effective if people see Jesus in us and want what we have, if they look at us, they listen to us, they're part of us, and they say, "Wow, they've got something, and I need that!" We will be effective if we point people to Jesus Christ, beyond ourselves. I hate to use this example, but there's a bad movie about Mini-Me's. You know? We're not about making Mini-Me's; we're about pointing people to Jesus. Our world is in desperate need of good news, and we've got it. We need to live it, proclaim it with our words, and proclaim it with our lives. Be the good news. Let's pray.

So, this morning, looking within, is there something in your life that is keeping you from enjoying this season? Is there something that is separating you from God? Is there something that is hindering the joy of this time of year? If so, now's the time to say, "Lord, I repent of that. Help me to be good news for the people in my life who are in desperate need of it." Let us pray together.

God we are so grateful for the gifts of this season. We are so grateful for the coming of Christ. We are so grateful for all that we, Your people, get to enjoy. Now, Lord, if there is anything in our lives that's hindering us from being good news for our world, we give that to You now. We repent of that, so that we might share Your good news with our world in desperate need of it. In Christ's name, amen.