



Dec 10: GET READY | MARK 1:1-8

Have you ever noticed Christmas is baby centric? How the story of Christmas is completely centered around the birth of a baby boy? His birth is the focal point, laying in a manger...the precious and profound vulnerability of God coming in the flesh. Advent is all about a baby.

I love babies. Even though my brothers did not provide nieces and nephews to spoil and teach how to swim, fish, and shoot a BB gun - I am not mad. I would have made a pretty good aunt. I love babies.

Do you remember Adler Stockwell's baptism in September? That was an amazing moment! I felt Adler become calm as God draw near. It was like God bent down and look Adler in the eyes and said "Hello".

And I knew at that moment, God was going to be very much in that boy's life, for the rest of his life. We love babies.

And great job from our Children's Coordinator, Andrea. As she led Early Word last week and love our kids. I had a front row seat to see just how well she grabbed their attention using the Sparkle Box book. Our kids were listening intently.

I would encourage parents, grandparents, and even Aunts and Uncles to buy The Sparkle Box, only 20 dollars. It would make a wonderful Christmas tradition for the kids in your life.

And I am grateful how we, in our church family, are making the Sparkle Box our spiritual practice for Advent. Noting the good things we do for others this season.

Writing them down, putting them in our Sparkle box in the Entry way.

Remembering what Jesus taught about doing good, **"...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."** Jesus receives our actions of doing good for others as gift, our gifts to him.

We'll open the Sparkle box on Christmas Eve and read the slips. Perhaps...blankets for the homeless, fruit baskets to senior citizens, a call to encourage a friend.

We'll share our good actions and give them as birthday gifts to Jesus, to celebrate his birthday!

Thinking about Jesus as a baby is part of our tradition. It is a centering image. The manger with Jesus wrapped up in swaddling clothes.

Such a mild, gentle, warm vibe of a new born, of family aglow with love, and God at work on a silent night long ago in Bethlehem.

We all enjoy that and it is good. But then... But then... Did you notice what our text gives us today? A crazy prophet! A wild man! Hair and beard long, disheveled, dusty, covered in camel hair clothing, leather belt, ranting in the wilderness.

Saying strange things, telling us to prepare, to prepare the way of the Lord, to make straight paths for him?

All the while chewing on locusts. Locusts...really!? Now he's just trying too hard.

We all want the baby Jesus in Christmas. But look at who we are handed? What are we to do with the Rantings of John? For us to repent, to turn back to God? To prepare ourselves for the One who will baptize us with the Holy Spirit?!

Couldn't we just focus in on the warm and soft baby Jesus? Could we just ignore and skip over the loud, disruptive, truth telling of John the Baptist? We could.

Some days all the "preparing" I want to do for Advent is to make some sugar cookies and maybe watch another Christmas movie.

But maybe God has something for us here? Maybe we have important truths to hear and respond to? Maybe we are being challenged in a whole new way? Challenged to think differently about what it truly means to prepare ourselves for Advent?

Maybe? Maybe.

What are we preparing or getting ready for this Advent?

John the Baptist, who went ahead of Jesus, was making the way ready for Jesus by spiritually preparing people for him.

In Advent, we are not just getting ready for holiday celebrations, we are making the way ready for Jesus in our inner spiritual lives. For us to clear out and clean up some more room in our lives for Jesus.

It's similar to when I know am having guests over. I finally change my mind about how much dirt I can live with.

As I really look at my home, put new eyeballs in...I start to see the dust, and the need to vacuum the cat hair off the couch, and the necessity to Swiffer the floor.

I clean up to prepare and get ready for them to come.

To prepare the way for Jesus, John also calls people to change their minds about the amount of dirt they can live with.

To look with honest eyes at the dirt in their own lives. To really see their stained attitudes, and grimy and grungy behaviors not in alignment with God.

This "changing our minds" has historically been called a fancy religious word, "repentance".

It means agreeing with God about what is right and wrong from God's perspective. Repentance is an important part of preparing the way for Jesus, cleaning up.

Requiring us to be attentive and responsive to what we notice going on inside of us. To note those attitudes and habits that might not be helpful in guiding us toward God and a life more connected to God.

Words like "repent" and "repentance" have many strong associations in our society that include heavy emotions like guilt, shame and condemnation.

It also means that at one point you might have been moving in one direction (away from God). And then all of a sudden, you do a 180...and head in another direction (toward God).

Remember my Ishmael story? That was a 180 changing of my mind. To finally agree with God's perspective on my church attendance.

The Greek work for repentance is "metanoia" meaning to change one's mind. I was familiar with that definition. But then I came across the Hebrew word for repentance...this is cool, I like this..."teshuvah,". It means to "to turn back" or "turn away". Teshuvah.

So then, repenting is about "turning away" from what does not connect us with God. And then "turning back" toward what does connect us to God.

The end goal is not shame or guilt or condemnation. The goal is connection, to be reconnected with God, in a deeper relationship with God!

Repentance is truly the gateway to abundant joy! In verses 2 and 3, the author Mark is connecting John's ministry to Isaiah. In Isaiah, a messenger was foretold to come. And John is that one.

John is the one who now cries out in the wilderness to "get ready" and "make the way straight for the Lord".

"Getting ready" for God spiritually, involves some intentionality and risk.

Preparation, getting ready can sometimes be lonely and uncomfortable like it was for John the Baptist. Especially when it involves changing the status quo or saying things that are challenging for people to hear.

But can we talk about John's outfit and diet? His message was hard enough to accept. Why did he go and make it ten times harder for people to respond to it?

Earlier in the gospel of Matthew, John's crazy look and crazy delivery caused people to think he was actually possessed by a demon.

And yet, people responded. They responded to the truth he spoke. People knew they needed to change and get ready for God. And they wanted to and many changed their lives.

It's probably why I like the prophet Jonah so much. Another prophet used by God. Called and sent...to teach Nineveh about repentance and this loving merciful God.

But if you look carefully in the book of Jonah, Jonah is uncaring, unsympathetic, and unrepentant throughout the whole book.

At the beginning, he wanted nothing to do with Nineveh. He was completely content for God to remove them from the face of the earth. By the end, Jonah waited and watched for their destruction. He never repented of his hard heart.

And it makes me wonder, what was missing for Jonah? Why did his heart remain closed to God's heart? Closed to God's plans for others?

He never turned back to what God wanted to do in him and through him. How sad!

Maybe what was *missing* for Jonah makes what is *included* in John's message...such good news. Good news for all of us!

Note what John *includes*, "**After me comes the one more powerful than I.. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.**" John acknowledged his limits...using plain water. But he includes the One to come will use the power of God, the Holy Spirit.

Jonah believed and knew God. But Jonah failed to make intentional space in his life, internally for God to influence him. So, if Jonah could miss that. I wonder could we be missing something?

Are we making space in our lives for God the Holy Spirit to influence us?

What might you need to repent of? Is there an area where God is identifying you need to practice "teshuvah", turning back? Remember God will help you.

Are we making time for God to influence us? If not, teshuvah.

Are we slowing down and allowing God to lead and guide us? If not, teshuvah.

What is something in your own heart, your own life that you need to set aside in order to make a straight way for the Lord?

Maybe it is simple forgetfulness and busyness, being self-focused? Or maybe it is fear? Fear of looking weird or fanatical for God?

Teshuvah.

What does the church need to repent or turn away from, set side, and turn towards to get ready for Jesus?

I believe our Sparkle Box could help us get ready for Jesus. What good have you done this week for others? Or good seen done by others?

Sometimes I think small acts of kindness are throw away, okay to forget. But maybe I need to take baby steps to change, become like a child again...and teshuvah.

Back now to Jesus in the manger, maybe it is good and wise for us to spend a whole month looking at this sleeping baby boy.

To carry the baby Jesus in our thoughts as we get ready for his coming.

Time of reflection:

For our time of reflection, maybe we need to change our minds and turn towards, our Sparkle Box.

Was there good you did or good you received this past week? What good might you do this coming week?