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"Prepare the Way"
Isaiah 40:1-11 Mark 1:1-8 2 Peter 3:8-15a

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH 40:1-11

Before the Almighty King could come His presence would need to be announced. While Isaiah may have himself felt like a voice crying in his wilderness he is the prequel to another voice. That would announce the coming of one who would not only be an Almighty King, but would one who would be tender like a shepherd who cares for lambs. Hear the word of the Lord from Isaiah 40:1-11

INTRODUCTION TO MARK 1:1-8

Last Sunday we began our season of Advent by hearing the story of Jesus' birth presented in song by our choir. This morning we take the next step in our journey by hearing the call to get ready for Jesus' ministry coming from Jesus' cousin John. Hear the word of the Lord from Mark 1:1-8.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for sending John to prepare the way for your son to begin his ministry. As we examine the role he played in Jesus' ministry, may you open our eyes to see how we too can prepare the way for Jesus to come afresh into our lives and into the lives of others. In Jesus name we pray. Amen

After some last-minute Christmas shopping, a woman was rushing her grandchildren into the car. It was then that four-year-old Jason said, "Grandma, Susie has something in her pocket." He then proceeded to reach into Susie's pocket and pulled out a new red barrette.

Though she was tired, this grandmother knew it was important for Susie to put the item back where she had found it. They did just that. Then they headed to the grocery store. Later at the grocery store checkout, the clerk asked, "Have you kids been good, so Santa will come?"

"I've been very good," replied Jason, "but my sister just robbed a store." (1)

He had an announcement to make regarding someone's need to repent.

All the "filmed before a live studio audience" TV shows and the late-night talk shows have an announcer. The announcer is the person that comes on before the show starts and warms up the crowd. He instructs them how important it is to laugh, to cheer, to clap, to get them ready for the main event.

Usually announcements in church are kind of boring, unless, of course, they get mangled. One pastor chuckled over a typo that changed the meaning of an

announcement that appeared in his church bulletin: "Choir rehearsal Wednesday night at 7:30. Everyone who wishes to "sin" in the choir must come to practice." What a difference a "g" makes.

I seriously doubt there is more sinning in the choir than anywhere else....and I don't think any of us need to practice getting better at sinning. Last Sunday however we experienced the results of our choir's practicing their "singing!"

Mark starts his gospel with an announcer. Some would say of this announcer that he was a religious eccentric. Others less kind would dismiss him as being simply a flake. Yet, this was God's unlikely servant chosen to announce the spectacular events that would soon follow.

John the Baptist pointed the way to Jesus, serving as a prophet for the people of his day. John began his ministry in the river Jordan. He came to call people to a new way of living. He also came to announce to the world that someone was coming after him.

From the very beginning everything about John was unique. His mother Elizabeth was a cousin to Mary, who became the mother of Jesus. Like Abraham and Sarah before her, Elizabeth was well past the child bearing years. But through the angel of the Lord appearing to her husband Zechariah when he was serving in the holy of holies, a promise was given that she, in her old age, would have a child. The angel told Zachariah that their son would be named John. In about the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Elizabeth's cousin Mary came to visit her. . When Mary greeted Elizabeth, Luke says that her baby was filled with the Holy Spirit and leaped within Elizabeth's womb.

When John started his preaching, he had it rough. He ate bugs. He ate bugs in bug juice (honey). The locusts John ate were probably not what I called locusts when I was growing up. They were probably not cicadas. They were more like grasshoppers. They were either eaten raw or roasted and were and are quite nutritious and a source of many vitamins. While most insects were considered unclean under Mosaic law, but Leviticus 11:22 specifically states that locusts are permitted.

Luke 1:15 also tells us that John was a Nazarite. That means that his family took a vow that from the day he was born that John would never cut his hair or drink wine (the wine might have helped with the locust eating).

On top of the fact that he was a tee totaling, bug eating, ball of hair covered in camel hair --his message was harsh as his appearance. He was always talking about sin, preaching repentance repeatedly. He even did that to the king Herod, which eventually led to his being beheaded.

John's goal in preaching against sin so harshly was not to humiliate people though. It was to shake them out of the idolatry of believing in themselves and

their good works. He wanted to show them how desperately they needed a Savior. Having convinced them of their sin, he would then be ready when Jesus comes on the scene to point the people to the solution to their sin problem by pointing at Jesus and announcing, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world."

It had been 500 years since a prophet was last seen much less heard. Multitudes of people were attracted to John and responded to what he had to say because they were baptized by him. All kinds of people came - tax collectors, soldiers, Pharisees, Sadducees, Temple priests - they all came asking John what to do and they listened to what he told them.

Richard Gribble writes that "The twentieth century provided numerous examples of prophets who have blazed paths for others to follow. In India, Mahatma Gandhi, through a method of nonviolent resistance, led his people to throw off British Imperialism and bring freedom to the sub-continent and its peoples. In the 1960s, using similar tactics, Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of the dream he had of a nation where people would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. In the late 1970's, Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador heard the cry of the poor in his land and acted to bring hope and justice to a society dominated by wealth and power. Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa provided the light to lead their nation out of the dark night of apartheid to a new light of freedom for all. Our history is replete with examples of contemporary prophets, but are we listening to their collective voice and finding the path they have blazed?" 1

This week Time Magazine could not limit itself to designating one person as their "Person of the Year." They designated a group of persons who blazed a trail by breaking the silence about sexual misconduct and abuse. Hopefully in honoring them, the dishonor brought upon their perpetrators will bring repentance, renewal, and restoration and revival.

My friends, if there has ever been a generation that needs to hear and respond to John's call to repent it is ours. Our focus is so fragmented. We make dangerous choices. We compromise with culture, inflict on ourselves pathetic attempts at improvement, and chase after every voice that offers us the promise of a better tomorrow. We have been deceived by those who have convinced us abundant living can be measured by how many presents are under the tree. Christmas is more than a new car in the driveway with a red bow and actors hugging it like it is their new best friend.

It's like a story that theologian Dale Bruner tells about a little boy named Gabriel Hurles. In January 2009 Gabriel turned six years old. Gabriel was so focused on eating his birthday cake, that he hardly noticed a giant package in the corner of the room. When another child pointed out the large gift, Gabriel ran over and began to tear off the wrapping. When the package was open, Gabriel discovered

it wasn't a bicycle or any of the other items a six-year-old would dream about for Christmas. Rather, it was Gabriel's dad, Army Specialist Casey Hurlles, home on leave from the war in Iraq. Gabriel and his father had been apart for seven months, so when Casey learned his leave would coincide with his son's birthday, he hatched a plan to offer Gabriel an amazing surprise. He had himself wrapped up as the ultimate birthday gift for his child. (4)

In essence, that's what God did for us in Jesus. God came wrapped up in the form of a tiny baby. Everything we know about God, we learn from his son, Jesus Christ. He is the Word made flesh. It came about because his cousin John prepared the way.

We must not make light of sin. Jesus thought it was serious. In fact, from some of his miracles one gets the distinct impression that he thought it was our greatest problem. In several instances Jesus forgave sin first and then healed sickness. As bad as infirmity is, sin is far worse, because sin takes us away from the God of life. It not only kills us, but it was our need for a savior that brought about the death of the only sinless person that ever lived.

John preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance is nothing less than owning up to the reality of our sinfulness. True repentance is a turning away from a careless attitude about sin. Repentance means turning away from believing that sin is not a problem and confessing that it is indeed a problem. It is my problem. It is our problem.

When I went to Mo Ranch last October for a Pastor's Retreat they had several options for our free time. One was archery. I decided to give it a try. My first attempt sailed over the target and landed in a haystack 20 yards beyond. My second attempt landed 2 feet short of the target. I tried again and this time I hit the target. After several more tries I eventually hit a bull's eye. Then I quit while I was perfect!

When the King James Bible was being translated from the original Greek, the archery term for missing the target is called a sin. In his letter to Romans, chapter 3 verse 23 Paul writes, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." God forgives our sins when we try and miss. The sins he has a harder time with are when we miss and fall short because we didn't even try.

This week I received the church newsletter from the First Presbyterian Church of Dickinson that was devastated by Hurricane Harvey. Their pastor, Kathy Sebring wrote about the support they received when people tried.

"God's goodness and love for our church revealed itself when over 60 volunteers from Clear Lake, Webster and Texas City Presbyterian churches, showed up and worked tirelessly to help gut and remove debris. Organizations, such as the Fuller Center for Disaster Recovery, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance as well as

churches around the country, have not only sent financial aid but provided physical labor. Individuals and churches have given us chairs, tables, hymnals, and more. We have had help with our worship services as college students, guitarist and pianists have brought their talents and instruments. Cleanup days brought people from all over the country; Massachusetts, Ohio, Washington, Florida, Michigan, North and South Carolina. As well as from all over Texas, Austin, Sealy, Sugarland, Tomball, Dallas, San Antonio, Lufkin and many more places have provided love and support. Old members and college friends have sent new handmade quilts, books, baby clothes. A website was created for us, a beautiful baby grand piano and worship chairs were gifts from churches in West Virginia and North Carolina. The blessings go on and on and we thank God for them."

That's people trying. That's people fulfilling their purpose. That's people being right on target.

John's purpose in life was given to him by God. God put him at the right time and the right place to do it. Our purpose in life is given to us by God as well. He has put us in the right place at the right time. All God expects of us is that we try and die trying knowing we will be forgiven if we repent and seek forgiveness when we sail over, or fall short of the glory God has designed us to show.

Through the power of the same Holy Spirit that caused John to leap in his mother's womb that filled John from before he was born and gave him the power to fearlessly call others to repent; we too can be fearless in fulfilling our destiny. We can prepare the way to celebrate the coming of our Lord into our lives and into other's lives. We too can join in the joy of answering God's call to repent and continuing to issue God's call to others to repent and in so doing we too can help ... prepare the way.

Let us pray. Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, since you have walked in our shoes, enable us by the same Holy Spirit of our baptism to proclaim the good news and prepare the way for your coming again so that you may be surrounded by people from all earth's cities and country sides. Hear our thanksgiving for all who have prepared the way for your good news to reach us.

We admire the bold preaching of the prophets and apostles. We appreciate the work of scholars and translators in preparing a written text for us to read. We are grateful for the printers and binders that make Bibles for us and for all who help us to read and understand the Word of God written. Most of all we thank you that your saving and forgiving love was embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, the great good Shepherd who has gathered his flock into the Church. For past deliverance, for present comfort, for future promise we give you thanks, faithful God.

This morning we pray for the First Presbyterian Church in Dickinson. We thank you for those that responded to their need. We thank you for those who have

responded in helping all who were affected by the flood waters and for the long-term response that will be required for recovery.

This morning we pray for those who have had to flee the fires in California. We pray for those who have lost businesses and homes, family members and friends. We pray for those first responders who are battling flames even now.

We pray for those who have answered the call to protect and serve. We pray for those who answer the call to put themselves in harm's way. We pray for those who answer the call to cry out against injustice and abuse. We pray for those who answer the call to mete out justice.

This morning we remember the victims of the attack on Pearl Harbor 73 years ago. We remember the hundreds of thousands of lives wounded and lost in responding to that attack.

We pray for Jerusalem, the city of peace. We pray for the violence rising once more to die down. We pray for leaders to come together and seek solutions so that what the angel said the night they made an announcement become true—that there would be peace on earth and goodwill to all.

1 CSS Publishing Company, Inc., Sermons On The Gospel Readings: Sermons for Sundays in Advent, Christmas, And Epiphany, New Beginnings in Christ, by Richard Gribble