



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“PREPARING THE WAY”

Scripture Lesson: Mark 1:1-8

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church, Charleston, SC, by Rev. James T. Rogers on Sunday, December 7, 2008.

We sure do a lot to prepare for Christmas, don't we? There are presents to be purchased, wrapped, and placed under the tree. Christmas cards must be mailed early enough to arrive in time. We spend time picking out the perfect tree or trying to make our artificial tree look perfect. We decorate our homes both inside and out. There are dinners and parties to attend; sanctuaries and Christmas trees to be decorated. We clean our homes to host our Koinonia group or Presbyterian Women Circle. There is baking to be done for school functions, cookie parties, and the church progressive dinner. And don't forget about the office Christmas party. We stay up late at night and get up extra early in the morning, just to try to fit everything into our hectic days. After all it's Christmas time and we want to be prepared to celebrate Christ's birth. But isn't something missing here? Is all of this work really preparing us for Christmas and Christ's birth and the gifts that he brings to our lives? How are we supposed to be preparing? Maybe our text this morning will shed some light on this subject.

Mark begins his gospel unlike any of the others. There is no genealogy of Jesus showing him as a descendant of Abraham and David like there is in the Gospel of Matthew. There is no miraculous birth story like in Luke. There is no testimony about the Word becoming flesh like in John. Mark simply begins with this declaration: “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Mark emphasizes that this isn't any good news; this is *the* good news, beside which there is no other. And this good news is the beginning of the fulfillment of the good news heralded by the prophet Isaiah. For those of you who have trouble memorizing Scripture, I have a word of encouragement. Mark's quotation of Isaiah is actually a blending of Malachi chapter three verse one and Isaiah chapter forty verse three. So you don't have to feel so bad the next time you mix up one of the Scriptures. For Mark the good news is that God's messenger has appeared on the scene and this messenger is preparing the way for the Lord.

At first glance, John the Baptist seems to be an odd character during the season of Advent.¹ John certainly doesn't appear on our Christmas cards or in our pageants and nativity scenes. And why would he? He won't be a part of the gospel story for another thirty years. However the wise men are part of our nativity sets and Christmas pageant here at church and they weren't present the night of Jesus' birth. But the wise men belong in the Christmas story, because they help us to understand Jesus' arrival and to properly respond. And in fact John the Baptist does the same. His ministry helps us to understand Jesus birth and how we are to live in response. Even more so his ministry helps us to prepare.

After all of his time in the wilderness, I imagine John the Baptist as one with a rough personal appearance to go along with his camel hair clothing and diet of locusts and wild honey. And out in the wilderness John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from

¹ “A Way Made Ready,” *Preacher's Magazine*. Advent Christmas 2005-6
[<http://www.nph.com/nphweb/html/pmol/pastissues/2005%20Advent/magdec4.htm>], December 1, 2008.

Jerusalem and the Judean countryside are confessing their sins and being baptized by him in the Jordan River. And just as John prepared the way for Christ's ministry on earth, his ministry can help us to prepare not only for the celebration of Christ's birth but also for Christ's second coming.

John's ministry first reminds us that we too are called out into the wilderness, away from the everyday pace of life. Our hectic schedules, our to-do lists, and our duties lead us to conform our lives to the world. And in the midst of our busyness we tend to forget God. I remember being told as a young boy that "if the devil can't make you bad, he'll make you busy." I didn't understand that quote when I was young, but I certainly understand it now. C.G. Jung was quoted as saying, "Hurry is not of the Devil; hurry is the Devil." So in the midst of the busyness, we must retreat to the wilderness so we can experience God anew and receive direction for our lives. It's no coincidence that the church sponsors or encourages so many retreats each year: retreats to Montreat and Camp Bethelwoods; events like Cursillo and Celebration; confirmation class retreats and winter trips. Retreats take us out of our routines and natural element and help us open up to God breathing new life into us. The Church has realized over the years that the busier a person is the more that they will benefit from experiencing a retreat.

Well I've seen your calendars and mine and I know it's just a little too late for us to plan a weekend retreat for this advent season. But I don't think that John's call to the wilderness requires getting into the car, as helpful as a trip away can be. Our retreating this advent season might involve five minutes in a comfortable chair listening for God's word to us. It might be a special devotion found in our email box each morning. How can you remove yourself from your normal environment long enough to hear God speaking to you? A few years ago Reverend Michael Bailey preached a sermon here at First (Scots) entitled "27 Seconds." In it he explains why he chose to wear a pastoral robe with buttons:

As I contemplated the forty years of ministry that lay before me, I knew that there would be inevitably those Sunday mornings when I would be running around like a chicken with its head cut off, trying to attend to the many needs that arise at a church on Sunday morning. And I thought that in those times I might need something to slow me down. And the buttons do the trick. It takes me twenty-seven seconds to put on my robe. So rushing off to worship, I have to stop and button my robe. And in the midst of those crazy mornings, buttoning my robe is Sabbath.²

How are you making your way out to the wilderness during this season of Advent? I know each of us has at least twenty-seven seconds.

Once we reach the wilderness, we immediately hear John the Baptist's call for repentance. The Greek word for repentance implies both a change of mind and a change of heart. This change involves turning away from complicity with the old world and embracing the coming kingdom of Christ. This change involves removing ourselves from the darkness and entering the light of Jesus Christ. If there was no darkness, then there would be no need for the light of Christ. But there is darkness even within our own midst. There are obstacles in our lives that hinder our relationship with God and in turn hinder our ability to receive Christ coming into the world. We tend to be so preoccupied with our self and our own survival that we sometimes make it impossible for us to turn ourselves from our sin. Unfortunately we grab a hold of distractions and idols and don't want to let go.

Pastor Edward Markquart shares this illustration of a zoo that was trapping monkeys:

² Bailey, Michael, "27 Seconds," Sunday, May 8, 2005, First Scots Presbyterian Church

Zoo trappers placed coconuts underneath a coconut tree, and these coconuts had holes drilled in them. The holes were about the size of a tightly-squeezed-fist of a monkey. The monkey would squeeze its hand through the hole and grab the white coconut inside. The monkeys would find more coconuts and would do the same thing with their other hand and then their two feet. By doing so, their hands and feet became larger and they could not withdraw [them] through the coconut holes. The only way to become free was to “let go.” To let go of the white coconut inside the coconut shell.³

By refusing to give up the coconuts, the monkeys gave up their freedom. Through repentance we let go of those things that distance us from God, and we receive with open arms the gifts that God has for us.

Advent truly is a time for repenting. This week we lit the second purple advent candle. Its color signifies royalty – the royalty of the coming king. The purple, however, also reminds us of the penitent season of Lent and our need to spiritually prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ.

After being called into the wilderness and repenting of their sins, people are baptized by John in the river Jordan. Their expectancy of the coming of the Lord moves them to action. Not only do they turn from their sin, but they also turn toward God through baptism. In our baptism we believe that God seals our redemption in Jesus Christ, identifies us as children of God, and marks us for ministry to the world. But we also believe that in baptism we participate in Jesus’ death and resurrection. We die to what separates us from God and are raised to new life in Christ. Not only do we turn from sin, but we also turn towards God. We realize that our lives are to be lived not pointing to ourselves, but instead to our God.

John the Baptist understood this. The Gospel of John records him saying, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” In Mark’s Gospel John says, “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.” Pointing our lives to Christ certainly isn’t always easy as we discovered this past Wednesday night during our study on the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus tells his disciples,

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”

Here Jesus tells his disciples that they are to be so secure in their own standing before God that they don’t have to insist on their own rights, but instead renounce them in the best interest of others. And in fact, that is exactly what Jesus does for us on the cross. Our lives are to point not to ourselves, but instead to our God.

On Friday night the Buffalo University football team upset the twelfth ranked Ball State team to win the Mid-American Conference championship. Immediately after the game Coach Turner Gill was interviewed on national television. When asked to share his thoughts, Coach Gill could have talked about how in only three short years he has taken what may have been the worst program in all of Division I-A college football and guided it to a conference championship. He could have talked

³ Markquart, Edward, “John the Baptist: Gospel Analysis,” *Sermons from Seattle: A Quest for Better Preaching*. [http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_john_the_baptistGA.htm], December 1, 2008.

about how his coaching led the team to handily upsetting the previously undefeated and twelfth ranked Ball State team. He could have shared how he has instituted this turnaround under the pressure of being one of only three black coaches in Division I-A college football. Instead of pointing to himself, on national live television he pointed instead to Jesus Christ, witnessing to his faith before anything else. As I told our kindergarten chapel this past week, we all can be God's messengers and spread the good news.

So go ahead. Shop for those gifts that are on your list and don't forget to wrap them. Bake those cookies for the progressive dinner this Thursday night. Adorn your home with all of those beautiful decorations that get relegated to the attic or closet most of the year. Mail all of those Christmas cards on time. You can even stay up a little late to get everything done. But just promise me that in the midst of all of the preparation, you won't forget to prepare yourself. Don't get me wrong, I love all of the pageants, dinners, gift exchanging, and parties. But all of that preparation won't do us much good if we don't prepare our hearts to receive Christ and point our lives toward him. Isn't that what Christmas is all about?