



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD”

Scripture Lessons: Malachi 3:1-4; Mark 1:1-8

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, November 29, 2020  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

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.’

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Waiting is not always the easiest thing for us to do, and, quite frankly, most of us are not very good at it when called upon. During our recent Thanksgiving travels as a family, we went to a lovely mountaintop location called Max Patch, which is located off of I-40 about an hour northwest of Asheville. I’m pretty sure it was the long and winding graded road which leads up to Max Patch that finally did in one of our van’s tires, because when we woke the next morning, it was totally flat. I took it to a nearby shop and they really did quick work - hardly 30 minutes from beginning to end; but, as someone who was anxiously trying to get the family back on the road in order to make it to our next destination, 30 minutes seemed like an eternity.

Perhaps like many of you, I have enjoyed reading about the progress of our various pharmaceutical companies and how a Coronavirus vaccine is seemingly just around the corner; and while I marvel at how quickly this has been accomplished, I still can’t wait...oh, what a blessing that will be for so many people when that time comes! Ah, to be certain, waiting is

sometimes a most difficult thing to do, and yet that is precisely what we are called to do during the season of Advent.

We come across the first reference to Advent in the latter half of the sixth century, and, since that time, these days which immediately precede Christmas, have traditionally been marked by a level of prayer and preparation, of expectation and hope. They have been marked by a spirit of repentance as the church anticipates the coming of Christ...and even that promised return of Christ - the second Advent. Oh to be certain, knowing the Christmas story as we do, we have some sense of what's on the way, but we don't get there overnight, and in the case of God's promised return; well, we don't know when that will happen...and so, here again, we must wait.

Now, in its wisdom, the church has given us certain signs and symbols which accompany our waiting. Suzy has already talked about the color purple which graces the pulpit this morning. It is the color of our stoles. Purple is for us a colorful reminder of our need for repentance and preparation, and as was pointed out, Tracey's sermon last week reminded us that the King of Kings, and this Lord of Lords is coming. This is Jesus Christ, and purple is indeed a royal color! And I would also point out that purple, it replaces this day the typical color of white which we wear and ordain the pulpit with at the time of someone's baptism. But how fitting it is that we have replaced it with purple this morning. Especially when we think about the deeper meaning of this season and its emphasis on waiting, and when we consider how it is that Ada and Grant have been baptized into future repentance of faith, and that we look forward with great joy to that time when they will claim God's love for themselves. And so, in some way, even for them we wait...we wait and watch and do our part so that they might continue to grow in wisdom and in stature and into the very fullness that God intends.

Another sign of this season is the Advent Wreath located to my right, lit this morning by Todd and Barbara Plaxco and their grandson, Miller. Each week we are invited to ponder certain themes of this season. This morning we talked about hope, and we will hear later about peace and love and joy in the weeks to come -- all the while, we lift up our heads...we look east...we proclaim, "O Come, O Come, Emanuel."

But that said, our waiting is not a passive thing. We know that we can pick up an Advent bag after worship this morning, and that we can track the season of Advent in that way. We know that each week we will sing even more familiar Christmas hymns. We know that, thanks to our Young Adults, the Scots on the Rocks, as they are called, to my left as early as next week there will be a Chrismon Tree, there will be poinsettias here in the sanctuary and elsewhere!

Ah, in these and so many other ways, we know what to expect from the Season of Advent...but I wonder -- do we ever stop long enough...do we ever stop long enough to think about how different the anticipation of Christ's birth was for ancient Israel? I mean, they lived in drama, not knowing when or how God's Messiah would appear; and, if we're honest with ourselves, in comparison, our seasonal observances are essentially devoid of that kind of dramatic tension.

And there are a variety of reasons for this, some of which we have already stated; but, for me, probably the greatest factor which has contributed to what is for us a rather tame and predictable season of Advent, is the fact that while we may know Advent, we seldom live Advent...and there's

a big difference. It is the difference between reading John the Baptist's prophetic words from this morning's New Testament Lesson, and hearing in them the same truth of transformation which was unveiled in the wilderness so many years ago. It is the difference between allowing the sights and sounds of the Advent and Christmas season to make us smile, and actually allow them not only to remind us of all that God has done but point us toward that which God has yet to do.

And lest we forget, remembering is not a bad thing...John the Baptist was himself a living memory, a walking, breathing relic, as it were. John was well aware of Malachi's faint rumblings and whisperings about what was to come. Malachi had said: "See I'm sending my messenger to prepare the way before me and the Lord will suddenly come to his temple." Well, John knew that he was that messenger. And he helps other people, helps us, not only to remember Malachi's message, but to hear it for the first time again. He quotes it, he lives it, which is to say that everything about John functioned as a living testimony to the very history and reality of God's people. And that testimony, it helped them, it helps us to know by virtue of the way he walked, the way he talked, his message of repentance – it helps us to know that all of what God has said before has brought us to this singular moment in time...to the arrival of God's coming Messiah!

Now, because God's Word is always revealed to us from within a particular historical context, it is wise and prudent that we take to heart Luke's account of this story when he says that these things are happening during the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar's reign and when Pontius Pilot was governor of Judea. In other words, certain worldly powers are well established, and the first hearers of this story, they would have been absolutely trembling at those names; yet God's Word came not to them, but to John...an ordinary person / a normal person, the son of Zachariah and his wife, Elizabeth.

And so it happened that from a common man, albeit a man chosen by God, were reiterated the words that the world most needed to hear and to actively pursue...words which are perhaps some of the most important words that we too need to hear - "Prepare the way of the Lord!" Thank goodness we know how to prepare! We do it year in and year out. Some of us decorate our homes with wreaths on our doors and candles in our windows...maybe we have a Christmas tree in the den or a nativity scene on the front lawn. And to all of this - to all of these kinds of preparations - I think John the Baptizer might say, "Fine!" particularly to those acts which serve as a means of Christian commemoration and remembrance; after all, John himself was a living relic, let us not forget. I think in the same breath, John might scoff at those things which are more or less fluff...those things which do not at all bear witness to the faith we profess.

You see, for John, a living witness is not going to be realized through inflatables, but through intangibles...through faith and hope and love! And this doesn't mean that we need to start wearing animal skins and eating honey-dipped locusts, but it does mean that we need to check our spiritual compass at the door and make sure that it is pointing toward eternity and not the North Pole! In this way, John implores us to make sure that we know where we are headed; that we are clear about the direction we are carrying the message of our lives. What's more, he helps us to understand that should we find ourselves going in the wrong direction - should our lives not reflect the will and the intention of God - then ours is also the opportunity to repent...to literally

turn around. And so, you see, the first step in preparing the way, is preparing our heart, because once we do that, Advent will not steal upon us like a midnight clear...we'll see it...we'll honor it...we'll live it...and those angels which we will have heard on high -- they will serve to heighten our awareness as to our continual need for change. They will reinforce that divine imperative that we wrap -- not presents -- but our arms around those we love, that we serve our neighbors in need, and we actually do the things that bring us life abundant!

There is a medieval legend about a man who was decadent and irresponsible in many ways, but who had enough grace in him to at least want to be good. He went to a costume maker. The costume maker made him an angel costume to wear, complete with a halo wired to his head. As the man walked down the snowy streets he was tempted to act and react in his normal, shiftless way; but then he remembered the halo on his head and so he decided to act differently. He gave a little money to a beggar on the street. He treated his wife well. He refused to cut corners at work. Eventually he returned the costume; but, as he was leaving the costume shop, the legend goes on to say that he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, and saw a permanent halo glowing above his head! It seems that he had become what he did. To put it another way, his repentance - the way he had turned his life around - it made possible a forgiveness and a transformation in his life...it gave him a new direction, and, in so doing; well, that man discovered the difference between knowing Advent and actually living Advent.

There's nothing wrong with celebrating the season of Advent - there's nothing wrong with wonderful traditions - for this is, after all, the very season which culminates in the miracle of God sending his son into the world as a means of reconciling us to God. The key is remembering the meaning behind our traditions, the meaning behind the symbols, because what this season is not...it is not a season for sentimental nostalgia; is it not a season for sentimental recollection. No! Advent is a season for remembering the prior work of God Almighty and preparing ourselves for the reoccurrence of that work right here and right now. But not only that -- it is also a matter of making ourselves ready for that great and glorious occasion when, in the fullness of time, our Savior will come again!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

\*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.