

## Mark 1:1-8

I think that a lot of us look forward to the month of December. Christmas arrives! Holiday cheer, family and friends, cookies, trees decorated, colorful lights, Christmas presents. But there is the cold. And there can be snow or ice. And when the wind blows, we may actually look forward to July and August.

This is how it is with John the Baptist. He is the bitter cold wind that comes blowing into our ears each December. He is the ice that falls as we are getting ready for Christmas. Not only do we think that John the Baptist is a little unnecessary, we would much prefer that he didn't show up at all, in our preparation for Christmas, because we have a certain dislike for him.

To begin with, he's a mangy fellow. He wears scratchy clothing. He eats locusts! He resembles a wild animal. If you saw him walking around your town, you would keep your distance. Perhaps you would call the police. And then there is his voice. He doesn't speak like normal people do. He yells. He cries out. He has no social etiquette. He demands to be heard above everyone else. He gets in your face, locust breath and all, and blows like a bitter cold wind into your ears.

Now we could possibly put up with that except for what it is that John says. He doesn't say, "Happy holidays! Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas!" He says, "Repent! Get down on your knees before God and repent of your sins!" Is it any wonder that the masses have no use for the church during Advent, but wait until Christmas to show up? *John the Baptist? Yech! The Baby Jesus we like...but John? Forget about it!*

Yet John does not come preaching because he feels called to it; because he has a score to settle with folks. God sends him. He is God's man; God's messenger. John's message is not his own. He preaches what God tells him to preach.

But all we need is Jesus, we think. Why does God bother with sending John to us? John is not our Savior; Jesus is. And we hear John every December. Isn't once or twice enough? Why does God keep sending John year after year through our entire life? We know already what John will say. Why do we have to keep hearing it? Let's just dispense with Advent and John, and do as the world does, jumping from Thanksgiving to Christmas.

Even if we do not actually voice such complaints, we may think them.

John the Baptist is a way-preparer. He "*will prepare Your way,*" Isaiah speaks of him. The way of Christ is the way John prepares. If Jesus is the healing medicine, then John is the surgeon's scalpel. He is the one who cuts into the flesh so the uncleanness can be removed and the medicine can be applied.

Quite a few of you have gone through such a procedure. You were laid out on the table, given an anesthetic, and the doctor wielded his knife to cut you open. But that's not why you were there. The scalpel was not an end in itself. He opened you up to expose the problem so that it could be corrected through proper treatment.

I don't think a doctor should delight too much in cutting into people. His delight should be in bringing healing to the patient. And so John does not delight in using the Law as a scalpel to cut into his hearers; to expose sin. His delight is in preparing the way for Christ to come with His healing Gospel.

Your pastor is required by God to use the same scalpel John used. I must let John speak today in the same way he spoke years ago. Our world today is no different from the world of John's day. We have

not improved since then. We have not come to the point where we no longer need the scalpel. The same sin lies festering within us as it did when John was preaching in the wilderness.

That's why God keeps sending John to us year after year, whether we like it or not, whether we love the one preaching or despise him. We need that scalpel. I need it as much as you. Even if you do not want to hear the harsh Law accusing you, I need to hear it accusing me. So I must be John in the pulpit for your sake and for mine. Our sin must be exposed. Yes it hurts to be cut into. But unless we are opened up with the Law, there can be no healing; there can be no forgiveness, no salvation. We must repent. Advent must come before Christmas. And not just in December, but every day throughout our life.

And friend, Christmas does indeed come. And not just on December 25. Christmas is here right now. John preached "*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" The preaching of repentance was Advent. The baptism of forgiveness was Christmas.

You are baptized. What happened that day? Christ came to you forgiving your sins, and making your heart His dwelling place, His manger. That's what Christmas is - Christ coming to His people. Your baptism was Christmas Day for you! A day of joy, and peace, and hope. Jesus is the healing medicine that came to you. And as all the angels were singing to the shepherds on Christmas, so too, when you were baptized, every one of those angels was singing for joy.

But what happens on December 26? We begin the process of taking down the decorations. We finish off the cookies. We stand in line to return gifts we don't want. Christmas is over. We lose the joy. The same thing happens with baptism. Did you wake up this morning and say to yourself, "I am baptized into Christ!" And was your heart filled with joy? Sadly, as we put Christmas away into a closet after all the celebrating is over, so we put our baptism in a closet as well. This should not be, not if we're Christians. And it doesn't need to be.

We're not Scrooges. We don't grumble, "Christmas? Ha! Bah humbug!" We celebrate the true meaning of Christmas: Christ is born for us. The same is true of our baptism. We're not Scrooges here either. We don't mutter, "Baptism? Ha! Bah humbug!" We celebrate what our baptism really means. The water of baptism is what we see with our eyes, just as the lights and trees, the presents and decorations are what we see with regard to Christmas. But with Christmas, something greater is going on than what meets our eyes: Christ comes to us. And in baptism, something greater is going on. In the water that we see, Christ comes to us here also.

If there was no Christmas, Advent would be pointless. We would not have this season in the Church Year. But Christ does come to His people. And so we go through Advent. We listen to John preaching to us. We repent of our sins. We turn away from them and humble ourselves.

Advent is not an end in itself. John prepared the way for Christ. Jesus is the forgiveness who comes to all who repent.

And that forgiveness is for you now and every day of your life. Christmas decorations may go in the closet later this month, but the true meaning of Christmas does not belong there. Nor does your baptism. The sign of the cross, upon which Jesus died for you, belongs on your heart always. And the meaning of your baptism, which proclaims God's forgiveness to you, is yours day after day all your life. Amen.