

Mark 1:1-8

Listening to John the Baptist during Advent is a little like getting socks for Christmas. If that's all you are getting, you're going to be pretty disappointed. You need socks, but no kid ever put them on his Christmas list. And when children go back to school in January and ask each other, "What'd you get for Christmas?" not one is going to admit, "I got socks!"

They're always opened first, or close to the start of the gift exchange. What a letdown if the last present to be opened is a pair of socks, even if they're nice socks. But kids know that when they get socks, the good stuff is still to come. And so they're nice about it. No one says, "Socks? Yuck!" They're not very excited at all when getting them, but they're courteous and say, "Thank you," because the gifts which are yet to be opened will cause great excitement.

And that's kind of how we look at John. Just like socks, he comes every year in December. We don't get upset about it, but we don't get too excited over him either. We don't mind hearing from John the Baptist because we know what's coming after him. Now if he was all there was to Christmas, that would be a real disappointment. But he's only the Advent preacher. The Baby Jesus comes later. And so, as with socks, we put up with John because the good stuff is still to come.

I would venture a guess that all of us are wearing socks this morning. They probably match the rest of our outfit. But even if they don't, no one will likely care because we don't hold up our socks for all to see. Our feet would hurt without them. Our ankles might get cold. But others notice, not the color of our socks, but the color of our dress, our slacks, our shirt, or our tie. And that's John the Baptist. We as Christians are not clothed with him; we're clothed with Christ in Holy Baptism. When others see us they don't see John, they see Jesus. But John is there just like our socks. And without him the rest of our outfit would not work. The socks go on before the shoes. John's preaching of repentance comes before Christ. We're not Christians of the Law; we're not people of John—we're of Christ; we are Christians, not Johnians. But like with socks, the Law must come first or the shoes of the Gospel of peace simply will not fit. And so let's put on our socks this morning. Let's let John speak. This is Advent. Christmas is coming, but we first hear the word of repentance.

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness," our text says, "Prepare the way of the Lord." John was a rugged individual. He would not fit in very well with our society. How he looked, what he wore, what he ate would turn him into a spectacle. But the thing that really mattered about John was his voice because it was the voice of God. John was God's prophet. The message he proclaimed was not some new opinion. Six hundred years earlier, through Isaiah, God told His people the words that John would be preaching. He would come to prepare the way of the Savior.

Do we need those words today; or have we gotten to a point where we can go without socks? Where we don't need any preparation for Christ? The world doesn't even know John the Baptist. It prepares for Christmas by shopping, baking, wrapping, and decorating. These activities are not wrong; they're just superficial. They do nothing for our sinful hearts. They make December merrier on the surface, but they do not prepare the way of the

Lord. Shoes without socks do not work, and Christmas without the Advent preacher, John, is just a winter holiday.

“Repent!” cries the voice of the preacher. “Turn from your sinful ways! Make straight the paths of the Lord!” We might think that repentance means saying, “I’m sorry.” Those words may come from the mouth of one who repents, but repentance is, by nature, a work involving the heart. You can say whatever words you choose to say. You can speak words of repentance, words of confession, or not. You control your mouth, but taming the heart is the work of God. I hope you are all repentant sinners, and surely you hope that I am, too, We heard each other this morning confess our sins to God. But do those words truly reflect the attitude of our hearts, or did we say them for some other reason?

The Law takes no prisoners. It kills everyone who hears it. I cannot listen to God preaching through John and afterwards say, “I’m not that bad of a person; others are worse than me.” The Law kills. It causes despair. It wipes the smile from our face and says, “You deserve hell for your sins!” John preached in a desert, and that’s where the Law takes us. It places us in a wilderness all alone. There is no shade to run to; no oasis to drink from. We can’t hide behind our goodness—the Law takes that away from us completely. Hearing the Law, God turns our heart into a desert so that we see clearly our wretched sinful condition; so that we bow to our knees in despair and cry: I am a worthless sinner. I have not lived as I should. I have nothing to offer in my defense. Please help me. Please forgive me.

Is this your cry today? Is this the attitude not just of your lips, but of your heart? If so, then you’ve put on the socks and you’re ready for the shoes of the Gospel. You may think that Christmas is still two-and-a-half weeks away. No so. Jesus is here today with His gifts of salvation for you. You may get into big trouble if you tamper with the presents beneath the tree, but these gifts of God are yours now to open.

John the Baptist may be the Advent preacher; the one known as the voice, but Jesus is the Word of God. Whatever word God speaks to you through John—His final Word to you is Jesus. John may have preached in a desert, but Jesus, on the cross, became a desert for God deserted Him. He was dying with your sins in His body. He was being punished with hell for all the wrongs that you and I have done. God, in anger, turned away from Jesus. Your Savior was deserted for you. And because He was, your life is now an oasis. The rich food of salvation is here for you to eat. Christ gives His risen body to you. The words you are hearing today are the waters of life. Jesus is your shade. He shelters you from the wrath of God. You will never feel that burning anger of hell because your Savior felt it for you. He is your oasis.

You and I didn’t happen upon this oasis. In baptism God brought you to these waters. On Sundays He draws you here to His Word and Sacraments. Here in His House you will hear from John, but you will always leave with Jesus. And this is a gift which is yours no matter who you are. If your name is “sinner,” then this gift of Christ is for you—and this shoe always fits. For even though your life is far from perfect...I know this because that’s my life, too...your life, wretchedness and all, is completely covered with the cleansing blood of Jesus. Do not leave this oasis planning on living in sin, but believe with your whole heart that you are now, and remain, a forgiven sinner for Jesus’ sake. Every one of you God forgives. Jesus was deserted on the cross for all of you. The gift is yours today.

You and I are not ever going to walk to heaven in just our socks. The words of John cannot take us there. But wearing those socks by hearing the preaching of the Law, God fits your feet with Christ—and He is the path of life. He is the way to heaven. Christ is, for you, eternal life. Amen.