

## Mark 1:1-8

When you have company coming over, do you set things in order, or do you leave your house the way it is? I'd be surprised if you didn't tidy things up. It might depend on who it is that's coming. For some people, you clean up after they leave. But for most, we want them to come in to a home that is clean and organized.

I've heard some people say that if they didn't have visitors over, they would never clean their house. They don't have time for it on a regular basis, and so they clean things up only because, and when, they are forced to. This tells me that such people don't clean their house for themselves, but only for others. They don't mind living in filth. They just don't want others to know it.

This, actually, is how we tend to be in a spiritual sense. We're not so concerned with the filth in our lives. We just don't want others to know that it's there.

Well, thank God for Advent, because Advent means that company is coming. I'm not talking about the visitors you will have later this month. I'm speaking of Christ. Jesus is coming...into our homes, into our lives, into our hearts. Whether we are in the habit of cleaning house on a regular basis or not, Advent is the signal to us that now is the time to repent. "*Prepare the way of the Lord,*" cries the preacher, "*Make His paths straight!*" Now is the time to clean up our lives; to turn from our sinful ways to the Lord.

When I read about the preacher, John the Baptist here in our text, I almost wonder if it would make sense to imitate him. He dressed like the prophet Elijah--camel's hair clothing, a leather belt, with a diet of locusts and wild honey. People were coming. "*All the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him,*" it says. Maybe we are too tame and mild here at Christ Lutheran Church. Maybe if we had a wild man in the pulpit with locust breath, we would see the pews filling up with people.

But consider this...where are all these people three years later? They were all coming out to John confessing their sins, we're told. But when Jesus told them that He is the Bread of Life in John 6, they all left and walked away. And when He was on trial, they cried, "*Crucify Him!*" Where's the repentance? For these people, it was not a daily occurrence. They came out to confess their sins because of John, but they didn't stay with Jesus. What's the point of that! Someone who comes to church because of the preacher will not be loyal to Jesus. It's like when rough men stop cursing when the preacher is within earshot, but when he is gone, they go back to their former ways. Or a church member who puts the Bible on the kitchen table when he hears the preacher is coming. If we repent only to impress others, because we want them to see our house is clean and in order, are we really even repenting?

What does it mean to repent? How do we prepare the way of the Lord? We know how to clean our homes. We know how to fool others into thinking we're clean and decent folks; but deep down we know that God is not fooled. "*Prepare the way of the Lord!*" is the cry. We know that preparing something requires action on our part. We prepare meals. We prepare reports for school or for work. But preparing the way of the Lord is very different from these.

To repent is not to go out and do something, but to admit that what we have done is wrong. Repentance is telling God, "I have made a complete mess of my heart and life. Lord, come and set things right."

Yes, repentance involves turning away from our sins, and there is a physical part to this. If we keep living in sin willfully, intentionally, we are not repentant. A thief will stop stealing when he repents. A husband will stop committing adultery if he is repentant. If you or I only pretend to clean up our lives when others are watching, we are fooling ourselves.

John didn't just cry, "Prepare the way!" He cried, "*Prepare the way of the Lord!*" To repent is to receive Christ, not in a heart that is clean, tidy, and in order, but to receive Christ in a heart and life that is filthy with sin that confesses, "I cannot clean up my sinful heart, Lord...You do it for me. *Create in me a clean heart, O God.*"

If we attempt to clean up our hearts and lives, but Christ does not come to live there, it's all for nothing. This is why repentance is not just preparing the way; it's preparing the way of the Lord. Your Lord Jesus does not come to you expecting to find a perfect house. He comes to make your house perfect. If you wait to come to Holy Communion until your life is in order, you'll never come. Jesus does not invite the righteous; He invites sinners.

Jesus is not here this morning to look for the filth in your life. He is here to forgive you. He doesn't care how messy your life is. Jesus doesn't care how filthy your heart is. He is just glad that you're here. Because His word to each and every one of you is "I forgive you. Every sin of yours, I forgive."

That's why He went to Calvary. He died there for you so that today He can come to you, and with nail-pierced hands say, "All your filth was laid upon Me, and all My holiness now covers you." This is what your baptism into Christ means for you. Every day you stand before God without spot, or blemish, or any sin. Your house is thoroughly clean. This is what Christ has done for you. "*You are already clean,*" He says in John 15.

Now here's a thought...since we cannot clean up our own hearts and lives, but we need Jesus to do this for us, how is it that we expect others to live tidy and spotless lives? To repent is to judge ourselves guilty and confess, "I'm a mess, Lord...please help me." It's not to see how clean our lives are compared to the messy lives we see around us. When you go to someone's house, do you look for the dust with a white glove on your hand? What if they took that white glove to your house? To your heart and life?

Here's how it is, friends...Christ died for all of you. You can look for the filth in your neighbor's life, but God doesn't. We all need to repent. We are all filthy sinners. But in Christ, you are all clean and holy. You are all forgiven. And this is how we can see each other--in Christ, clean and holy. In this way we move through Advent to Christmas with true joy, having Christ in us and before us. Amen.