

If when the freezing rain started falling last week you were one of the houses that lost power or if your business had to shut down for a couple of days because of no electricity you might already be reevaluating plans. I talked to a number of people who are considering a generator for their home in anticipation of the next time the power goes off. Then they won't lose food to spoiling, suffer in low temperatures, and be without power again. But every one of those people, and any of you who are thinking about getting a generator, know it was too late when the ice dropped tree branches and cut off power. At that point it was too late to be properly prepared.

It will be too late to be properly prepared for Jesus' return on the Last Day on the Last Day. By then the judging will be taking place, believers and unbelievers being separated, and in a flash it will be over. That's not the time to be reevaluating plans. That's no time to look at Jesus and think, "I probably should have believed in him". There's just a moment at which it's too late to be properly prepared.

Now is the time to get prepared. Mark wrote in his gospel about one whose sole purpose it was to prepare people for the coming Christ. While he prepared people for Jesus' coming the first time, we gather during this season of Advent to prepare ourselves for Jesus' second coming. It's imperative we be properly prepared for that. Before us we have the gospel of this morning letting us know...

Advent means being properly prepared
Hearing about a baptism of repentance
Hearing about a powerful one coming

"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way." These are words of introduction to the gospel written by Mark. But he only quoted words written well before he lived. In fact 400 years or so before Mark, God called the attention of his people to look for one who would come to prepare the way for The One he had promised to send. It was the promise of a Savior. God's people may have expected the Savior to come quickly. It wasn't until 400 years later that the voice of one calling in the desert was heard. John the Baptist came to prepare people. He was a herald with a message to proclaim. His message wasn't his own, but God's.

John heralded God's message to properly prepare people. **"So John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance."** They came from the big cities to the desert and listened to John. Immediately they were met by sharp jabs of the law coming at them. In another gospel John is quoted as saying, **"You brood of vipers!"** He pulled no punches. They were sinners and John called them so. He openly told them they deserved God's condemnation and punishment. John was purposefully afflicting their hearts with the sting of death and striking their conscience to bring about guilt. These people needed to be convicted, needed to know why they would die.

But repentance dare not stop there. John was leading people to their sinfulness in order to have them despise their sinfulness. To repent also was to turn away from sin. Leave it behind. To repent a person couldn't live with their sins anymore. They wouldn't want to continue existing in sin. Repentance can't just stop with feeling guilty and sinful. Any person who left after only hearing John's proclamation of the law left sad and worse off than when they came to him.

So John's message of a baptism of repentance also included the gospel. The gospel declared forgiveness of sins. Not forgiveness as reward for confessing their sins. Not forgiveness earned by repenting or even showing up to listen. Hearing the gospel granted the blessings of the gospel. And the baptism that John baptized people with in the desert, in the waters of the Jordan River, actually conveyed that which it promised. **"Preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."** Forgiveness of sins in the hearts and lives of those people brought about by baptism. John's baptism was a real means of grace.

Proper preparation for us means repentance too. That means being confronted with our sins. When someone tells you that you've done something wrong is it a jab to the gut? Like hearing them call you brood of a viper. To that you'd probably react poorly, fighting back, and trying to defend yourself. No way has our sinful nature wanted to think about how sinful we are. It hurts to even look in the mirror after we've avoided people because of how they look or what they do. We get uncomfortable anytime anyone gets close to even talking about websites we know we've gone to but shouldn't have. Do people have to be listening so closely when we let a curse word fly or demonstrate a greedy heart in reaction to someone coming out of a store with Christmas gifts?

Knowing our sinfulness is preparation. It's an important part of repentance that John insisted had to happen, and God says has to happen for us too. **"Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him."** As part of repentance, God ultimately wants you to hear the gospel. And when the gospel comes, it comes strong. A gift that's yours because of love from God. Repentance is worked in you by God. God turns you around. Assures you of forgiveness in multiple ways through multiple people. **"Almighty God in His mercy has given His Son to die for you and for His sake forgives you all your sins. I therefore forgive you all your sins."** One spouse telling another they forgive them for what they've done to hurt the other. A friend sharing that all sins have been paid for, so you can look in the mirror at someone saved by grace. God's grace, the love he has for you, changed your life. Forgiveness is real. Christ died for it. He rose again to prove it. Your sins have been forgiven. That baptism you experienced, it's real. It really conveyed to you the forgiveness of your sins.

People forgiven of their sins are changed, can even change what you view as important. Consider John. **“John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.”** Following Jesus changed John. He was changed by God’s grace as you are in Christ. John wasn’t trapped by materialism. Nothing was as important as Christ. Perhaps that’s where you will experience growth in repentance and the reality of forgiveness. Cutting out those things in your life that become more important than following Jesus. Maybe cutting those things out and replacing them with Word and sacraments to keep you close to God.

While preaching repentance to affect people’s lives John knew he had power. **“A voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.”** John was that voice. Big crowds, coming to him, big changes in people’s lives. His message was powerful, even though he looked pitiful. His baptism was powerful, even though it was dirty Jordan River water. But all this power wasn’t his own. God granted him this power as a prophet, but John wouldn’t save anybody. John was a herald, an ambassador, called to be a forerunner. John announced that someone more powerful was coming. So powerful, so amazing, that John couldn’t even do the servants work of untying his sandals. To be properly prepared was to hear about this powerful one coming.

That one coming had a baptism to perform as well. While it would be more powerful than John’s baptism it wouldn’t negate John’s baptism. Didn’t mean that what John was doing in baptizing people didn’t matter. John’s baptism was a means of grace. People came to faith and that only happens when the Holy Spirit is working through a baptism. It wasn’t just a ceremony to be performed. John baptized with water for the forgiveness of sins. But only the Son of God, the one coming to complete his work of redemption, could baptize with the Holy Spirit and pour out his gifts on sinners saved by grace.

His message is one you still hear through the centuries. It prepares you during this season of Advent. **“After me will come one more powerful than I...I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”** Your baptism at this font or any other was powerful, it meant something, it saved you. The Holy Spirit now dwells in your heart by faith because of what God accomplished by water and the Word of God. The promises God makes to you in the Word prepare you. Promises of an eternal life to come. Promises of a hope for a better perfect life in heaven. Promises that what Jesus did was for you secured in his resurrection from the dead.

But more is coming. The Last Day will come, when Jesus who pours out the Holy Spirit, will arrive on earth a second time. Christ’s work of redemption is complete now. But what’s left is to gather in the harvest of believers. You have been made a believer by the forgiveness and love showed you. Jesus has already taken your sins, piled them up, wrapped them in his death on the cross and sent them as far away from you as he can. Only God himself can remove your sins so far from you that even God cannot and will not recall them on the Last Day. This is how he has forgiven you in Christ.

It makes you prepared. You’re prepared when someone asks you about what you believe and you confidently answer that you’re a Christian and then say more about that means. You’re prepared as you forgive others their sins against you and tell them why. You’re prepared as you consider your life, at whatever age you are, and think about how much better it will be in heaven. You’re prepared as you bask in forgiveness, trust in God’s mercy, and release your lingering guilt to the unending and complete forgiveness won for you by Christ.

Another season of Advent means another season to get yourself properly prepared. To be ready when the more powerful one comes back be watching and waiting. Live in repentance. Hear the message about your sinfulness and hear the message about your Savior. Pay attention to the signs God reveals in his Word, signs like John the Baptist. He was the forerunner just as predicted. After him came Jesus. Christ Jesus came to grant you knowledge of him and the reality of forgiveness. Live in that knowledge of Christ and his forgiveness during Advent and all year and you’ll be properly prepared for Christ’s return.