

# Preparing the Way

*“John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness,  
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Mark 1:4*

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Welcome to the gospel of Mark. As we begin a new liturgical year this Advent, we transition from Matthew, who has provided us with most of our gospel readings this past year, to Mark, from whom we will be hearing the good news on most Sundays in the year to come.

Mark is the shortest of the four gospels, and almost all scholars now agree that it was the first to be written, probably some 35 to 40 years after Jesus’ death. Mark is important for this reason alone: of all the gospels, he gets us closest in time to Jesus’ life and ministry.

We know next to nothing about the author of Mark. Some scholars speculate that he may have been the John Mark who appears in the twelfth chapter of Acts as a traveling companion to Paul. Another early church historian suggests that the author of this gospel may have been a friend of Peter’s. The truth is that there is not enough evidence to confidently say much at all about the author of our text.

What we can tell from the text itself – which is not elegantly written – is that its author was not well educated. His Greek is simple, sometimes clumsy, without ornamentation or obvious literary style. His transitions are often abrupt and there is an intense urgency that runs throughout his gospel, his favorite word being “immediately.”

As the writer Frederick Buechner puts it, “Mark is a man in a hurry, out of breath, with no time to lose because that’s how the people were he was writing for. The authorities were out for their blood, and they were on the run. At any moment of the day or night a knock might come at the door, and from there to getting thrown to the lions or set fire to as living torches at one of Nero’s evening entertainments took no time at all.” (*Peculiar Treasures*, 110.)

We tend to forget just how dangerous it was to be a Christian in first century Palestine, what courage it required to place one’s faith in Christ, and to publicly say as much. And this was particularly so around the time Mark is writing

his gospel, which coincides roughly with the Siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.

So, perhaps it is not surprising that Mark leaves out much that we find in the three later gospels. Notice, for example, how Mark begins his narrative, in contrast to Matthew and Luke. Mark tells us nothing about Jesus' birth or family history. There are no angels visiting Mary and Joseph, no shepherds, no manger scene, no star guiding wise men to the infant child. Nor is Mark like John, who begins his gospel with a sophisticated and lengthy theological reflection on the Word made flesh.

Rather, Mark begins with alarm bells. Right off the bat, he takes us into the wilderness where, without warning, we meet a vaguely crazy character named John the baptizer. Dressed in camel's hair reminiscent of Elijah, and munching on locusts and wild honey, John is a frightening figure whose role quite clearly is to get our attention. Wandering the Judean countryside, John cries out to anyone willing to listen. And his message is as stark as his appearance: "God is coming. You had better get ready. Repent!"

By starting his gospel in this way, Mark seems less interested in story-telling than he is in delivering an urgent message for an audience that no doubt understood the existential importance of choosing for or against Jesus. Far from inviting us to cozy up by the fireside for a softly sentimental tale about the baby Jesus, through the character of John the Baptist, Mark is instead knocking us upside the head, waking us from our slumber, provoking us out of complacency. Long before the advent of Twitter, Mark understood the virtue of distilling the essence of an important message to far fewer than 140 characters: "God is coming. You had better get ready. Repent!"

Repentance, unfortunately, is one of those words that carries with it a lot of negative baggage. Too many of us think that to repent means to beat ourselves up over our failures and mistakes, and that God will not love us unless we do. But that is not what repentance is about. The word 'repent' comes from the Greek word, *metanoia*, which means simply to 'turn around.' To repent is to re-orient one's self, to acknowledge that we may be going in the wrong direction, and to find one's bearings. Repentance is not so much about guilt and shame as it is about turning *toward* God and asking for His help in reclaiming the good, the true, and the beautiful in our lives, and saving us from the array of self-destructive habits, practices, and idols to which we too often succumb.

As the Franciscan writer, Richard Rohr, puts it: "Most of us were taught that God would love us only if and when we change. In fact, that has it backwards.

God loves us so that we can change. What empowers change, what makes us desirous of change is the experience of love. It is that inherent experience of love that becomes the engine of change.”

Those of us who have fallen deeply in love with another person know what Rohr means. When you first feel yourself drawn to another person in love, suddenly the most important thing in the world is to become a better person for that other. Not only do you want to look your best, and be at your most charming, but more profoundly, you want to share all that you value with this other person – your friends, your family, your treasure, your hopes, your dreams. To be in love is to find oneself in the grip of a longing to become worthy of the other’s love, to better one’s self for the sake of the other. Genuine love always provokes change toward the good.

To repent, in this sense, is preparation for love. To repent is thus not about dwelling in guilt so much as it is to acknowledge as honestly as we can all the things – the vanities, anxieties, compulsions, addictions, self-absorptions, disordered affections, and the like – that are keeping us from the love of God. To repent is to name these broken parts of ourselves, and to ask God’s help in clearing them from the landscape of our lives, so that we might align ourselves more closely with His will for us.

Such repentance is, as today’s gospel reminds us, is not just reserved for Lent; it is also one of the central tasks of Advent. As we patiently await the coming of God into the world, we first have to ask whether we’re really ready for God. We have to be prepared. Borrowing a phrase from the prophet Isaiah, John the Baptist urges us to “prepare the way of the Lord.” Just as the exiled people of Israel long ago were told to clear a path for God, to make a way where there appeared to be no way, John tells us to likewise make room for God’s arrival, to remove the obstacles and impediments, to clear out old animosities and grievances, to cut back the weeds of doubt and greed, not just to make a nice little bed for the newborn babe but more importantly to open ourselves to His transforming grace. In Advent, we are called to attune our hearts and minds to the many ways that God enters our lives and the life of the world.

So, as a little Advent exercise, I would invite you to engage in a thought experiment. Just imagine that your long-lost beloved, the person whom you treasure more than any other person in the world, is finally returning home after a long absence. What would you do to prepare yourself for her or his arrival? What distractions in your life would you be sure to set aside? How would you ensure that your very best, and most giving, self is ready for this special visitor? What would you change about yourself in preparation for this moment?

This is exactly what John the Baptist is inviting us to do this Advent as we await the coming of God's only beloved Son into our lives. And in order that we might prepare ourselves for his arrival, let me close with a favorite Advent prayer of mine from Julian of Norwich:

“Lord, let not our souls be busy inns that have no room for thee or thine. But quiet homes of prayer and praise, where thou mayest find fit company. Where the needful cares of life are wisely ordered and put away, and wide, sweet spaces kept for thee; where holy thoughts pass up and down, and fervent longings watch and wait thy coming. Amen.”