It’s Beginning to Look A lot Like Christmas

Mark 1:1-8

11/28/22

To borrow the words of Meredith Wilson: “It is beginning to look a lot like Christmas, everywhere you go.” Thanksgiving is done and the leftovers are consumed. Black Friday is over. As you go about your life, this week you’ll see that it is beginning to look a lot like Christmas. Christmas decorations are going up. The trees are being assembled. The lights are being hung. Children make their wish lists and send their letters to Santa. Cookies are being cooked, and the stores are becoming crowded with shoppers trying to find that perfect gift for all of those on his or her list.

* How are your Christmas preparations going?
* Is your tree up?
* Is the house decorated?
* Does anyone have all their Christmas shopping done?
* Is anyone completely ready for Christmas?

I thought so. Christmas can be such a busy time of year with all the preparations that we have to do. It can sometimes feel like a relief when the holiday is over, and all the busyness and preparations done! The busyness of Christmas is something that we can all relate to. God can as well. He knows what it is like to prepare for Christmas and for Christ’s coming. He had to prepare the world for His Son’s arrival.

In the Old Testament, we see some of those preparations. In Isaiah’s day, some 700 years before Christ, God was already planning their return from Babylon through the Babylonian king Cyrus. He was already orchestrating the events to get him into power, and to set into motion the events that would get His people back home. Later on, God would work through Alexander the Great who spread the Greek culture and language through his conquests. God had the Romans come to power, and they were the ones who practiced crucifixion and put people like Herod and Pontus Pilate in power. God worked through Caesar Augustus’ census that got Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem while Quirinius was governor of Syria. God was preparing for His Son’s arrival.

This was not all that He did, and Mark makes that clear. He writes: As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘“Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight,’” John appeared…. God sent John the Baptist to prepare His people and to prepare the way for His Son. John the Baptist was that promised messenger of old and the new Elijah that was to come before the Messiah. He even dressed like him too with the camel’s hair and leather belt. John was to prepare the way for Jesus. He was to remove the obstacles and things that would hinder and affect His coming. So, how did he do that? Let’s look at the text.

Mark 1:1-8

*1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,*

*2 as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”*

*3 “a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’*

*4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

*5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.*

*6 John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.*

*7 And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.*

*8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” He did it by baptizing and preaching!*

Mark writes: “John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness, and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” People came from everywhere to be baptized by John and to hear him. Those who came from Jerusalem walked about 20 miles downhill and would then have to walk 20 miles up hill on their way back! Talk about commitment! The people would come to John, confess their sins, and be baptized, which showed they were forgiven.

John wanted the people to be ready for the coming ministry of their Creator and Savior. He wanted them to remove and confess the obstacles and crookedness of their sin, for repentance recognizes one’s crooked paths and turns to a new, straight direction. The prophet wanted their hearts and lives prepared for the Coming One Who would save them. He wanted them to see their need for grace and forgiveness and point them to the One Who gives it. His baptism helped with that.

But John didn’t just baptize, He preached too, and Mark gives us a glimpse of the content. John preached, saying, “After me comes He Who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” John pointed ahead to the Greater One, the Savior, Jesus Christ. In fact, John says that He is so great, that John is not even worthy do the task of a servant for Him, like untying His sandals. That is like saying he is not worthy to carry the cleats of an upcoming player. It shocks you. It gets your attention. It focuses you on the One Who comes that will be greater, better, and more grand. John the Baptist pointed them to Jesus. God prepared His people for the coming of Jesus through John the Baptist’s baptizing and preaching.

How do we prepare for Christmas?

We might decorate the tree, go shopping, and prepare for parties, but do we prepare for Christ’s coming? How do we prepare for the One Who came still and will come again? Do we prepare at all? Is it on our minds, or can the busyness of the season distract us? Our text is a great aid in preparing us for the coming of Christ.

* There once was an owner of a greenhouse who hired a young man whom he had judged to be a hard worker. Although the owner’s judgment proved to be correct, the greenhouse plants began to die. Then the owner called a more experienced gardener to remedy the situation. Soon the plants began to grow larger and healthier. The owner was puzzled, “What made the difference?” The experienced gardener explained, “When the young man moved the plants, he did it with great caution and care. But I was rough with them. I disturbed their roots. Plants flourish when you shake them up at their roots.”

Sometimes we also need a rough shake-up. It is good for us. We prepare for Christ’s coming by repenting of our sin, by being shaken at our roots. When we repent, we see where we fall completely short in our Christian lives, and how we miss the mark. We see quite clearly how we cannot save ourselves and how we are by no means perfect. “Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments:

* Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker?
* Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy?
* Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome?
* Have your hurt someone by your words or deeds?
* Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?”

These questions take no prisoners and leave no one out. When we repent, we see our need our grace. We are pointed to our Savior, Jesus, the One Who took the fault, blame, and punishment of our sin. We are pointed to the One Who makes things right with God and makes our path straight before Him.

We also prepare by remembering our baptism. To remember our baptism, we recall the name and words spoken over us at that event: “I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.” At our baptism, God’s name was placed on us, marking us as His redeemed children and making us members and heirs of His family. On that special day we came to Christ, we received many gifts, like the Holy Spirit, forgiveness of sins, a rescue from death and the devil, and eternal salvation. On that day, we were united to the One Who saved and forgives us. The gifts and blessings come because of Christ’s death and resurrection for us. When we remember our baptism, we remember how these gifts have been given to us. Baptism is the proof and reminder of this!

Closing:

Ultimately and finally we prepare by looking to the One that John pointed to. Radio commentator Paul Harvey tells of an experiment involving a chimpanzee that scientists were determined to teach written communication. For 14 years project directors labored with this chimpanzee, providing symbols in its cage to enable him to form syllables. Finally, the day arrived when it seemed the chimpanzee was actually going to make a sentence. Word went out. Other scientists crowded into the room. They watched breathlessly as symbols were formed into words and words formed into a sentence. At last, the first message from the world's most pampered, most cared for and most patiently trained chimpanzee was about to come forth. The scientists could hardly contain themselves as they pressed around the cage to watch the history-making sentence. What did the chimpanzee communicate? Three words: “Let me out!”

As ironic as that chimpanzee’s cry was, when we finally admit to our bondage it strikes at the heart of our human cry: “Let me out!” Some of us this morning may be in the cage of addictive behavior like high anxiety, unpredictable anger, or biting sarcasm or pride. Some know the dark world of pornography. Others are chained to a grudge that won't leave until there is revenge. Still others are fighting an inner battle with a skeleton in our closets that is rattling louder and louder. Whatever your particular sin, it has left us in a cage of despair, darkness, even death. Our heart cry must become: “Let me out!”

That is why we look to the One Who is mightier than John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, who hears our cry and lets us out from those things. Jesus is the Mighty One Who is stronger than the devil, his minions, and all his schemes. He has defeated them and will at the Last Day. Christ is mightier than death and has swallowed it up and destroyed its sting. He is mightier than guilt, shame, regret, temptations, and the skeletons in our closet. He is stronger than sin and its clutches and has paid for it at the cross with His life and blood. May we daily be pointed to the Mighty One Who lets us out by His life, death, and resurrection.

Truth is, if you don’t have a real & genuine relationship with Jesus Christ, all you have is the “look of Christmas” to bring you hope, joy, peace, and happiness; But with that daily relationship with the One for whom the season is truly for, you can have the look, feel, and everything else Christmas comes with every single day of the year!

God so loved the World that He sent His only begotten Son so that whoever would believe by faith that He was the Son of God would be saved...No preconditions matter...No sin, issue, drama, is too much to forgive...

Prayer

This morning, as things around us begin to look a lot like Christmas, may our hearts reflect the One for whom the season truly is for...Jesus Christ!