

Scripture:

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

“Prepare the way for the Lord...”

Mark’s gospel ----- hopefully kind of like this sermon ----- doesn’t beat around the bush.

Mark’s approach is to be simple ----- direct ---- and to the point.

Mark doesn’t spend any time accounting for the genealogy of Jesus like Matthew does ----- he doesn’t try to explain why he’s writing his gospel like Luke does --- and he doesn’t delve into any kind of cultural theological perspective like John does in his opening verses.

Mark is direct ---- and there is even a certain urgency in his gospel ----- the word “immediately” --- which is found at least 7 times ---- characterizes Mark’s gospel as much as any other word.

And the first verse demonstrates this urgency and immediacy ----- “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah.”

“The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah.” --- Mark’s not fooling around.

And Mark is not only far more direct than the other gospels --- he is also considerably shorter in length ----- his gospel is a quick 16 chapter introduction to Jesus Christ.

There is little about what Jesus taught ---- and more of simply what He did.

There is little theologizing ----- and more recounting.

Less reflection ---- and more simply stating.

When people come to me --- and this typically happens at least a few times a year ----- when people ask me things like ---- “I don’t know much about the Bible --- I’ve never read it all cover to cover --- I’ve tried getting into some of the Old Testament but have found it pretty difficult and hard to

understand ---- can you help me out ---- where do you recommend I start reading first.”

My answer is simple ----- and almost always the same ----- “Try Mark’s gospel first --- start with Mark.”

Why ----- because it’s simple ---- approachable --- direct --- and to the point.

In verse 3 from Mark’s gospel reading today we have the famous Advent words --- originally found in Isaiah 40 verse 3 ----- “Prepare the way for the Lord...”

And Mark’s gospel as a whole is a great way to ---- “prepare the way for the Lord” --- in people’s lives who may not really know much about Jesus.

As I’ve said ---- it’s precise --- direct --- and to the point.

And we can learn from this.

And we can learn from this because like Mark --- like John ----- indeed like all Christians ---- we too are called to prepare the way of the Lord simply and directly.

Yes Mark makes an effort to place Jesus into the context of Old testament prophecy and God’s will by quoting Malachi and Isaiah in verse 2 and 3 --- but he then wastes no time leaping into the good news about Jesus ---- as he clearly says in verse 1.

Advent is all about us preparing the way for the Lord.

We are to be the messengers that Mark is talking about in quoting Malachi and Isaiah.

We are the ones who are to be preparing the way ---- and making straight paths for Christ.

A large part of what Mark is telling us is that we are invited to follow John and to follow Jesus ----- and to try to be like them --- and to invite others to follow and try to be like them too.

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

But if we look closely at this quote it doesn't come from Isaiah at all but from Malachi ----- specifically Malachi 3 verse 1.

Of course the next verse in Mark's gospel --- does indeed come from Isaiah's prophecy --- so we can understand where Mark is coming from --- blending the two quotes together.

But I think it makes sense to consider what comes from Malachi separately as well.

And the reason is simple ----- when we look at the context of ----- “I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way” ----- in Malachi ----- we gain some perspective and insight as to what exactly this might mean.

The messenger in the book of Malachi who is preparing the way ----- is one who comes to purify and cleanse.

Indeed the purpose of the book of Malachi is to confront the people in Jerusalem with their sin and to restore their relationship with God through cleansing and purifying.

And just after the verse that Mark quotes in our gospel reading today we have some of the most well known imagery from Malachi's prophecy ----- imagery of purifying and cleansing -----the refiner's fire and the launderer's soap.

The messenger in Malachi was to cleanse and purify.

To cleanse and to purify ----- as a way of preparing for the Anointed one at the Anointed time.

And of course that's precisely what John was engaged in as well ----- cleansing and purifying --- preparing for the Anointed one --- through the act of baptizing.

And of course Jesus is the one ----- that Malachi and John have been preparing for.

Jesus comes to purify life --- to clean up life --- to save us from being trapped only in the kind of life that ends in death --- a life without Him.

And of course we are called to prepare --- ourselves and also other people for His coming.

And what better time than Advent.

What better time than Advent to say to people in words and in deeds --- that the world needs to be cleaned up a bit ----- and paths need to be made clear -- -- certain stuff needs to be pushed out of the way for Christ ----- and preparations need to take place --- hearts need to be made ready and opened up.

I can't help but think of an image of something like ----- a handful of Christians ----- marching into a department store --- like Wal Mart or Target ----- and making a path --- creating a path for Christ --- by pushing aside and collapsing a whole bunch of Christmas displays ---- and setting up a large scale nativity scene.

Ferron rocher ----- candy canes --- wrapping paper ----- Christmas sweaters ----- all pushed aside to make way for a huge nativity scene ----- that of course isn't for sale ---- but is simply a display --- a voice calling out from the wilderness.

That would be a way of preparing and making the kind of a pathway --- that Mark is talking about.

As many of you know we lived in Guelph before we moved here to Whitby.

And before we came here ---- a few Christmas' ago now ---- this exact kind of thing took place in Stone Road Mall in Guelph --- the one big mall in Guelph.

And how it happened was that there was a large nativity scene set up in the main concourse of the mall.

And many of the retailers didn't like it ----- "It takes up space that could be better used to advertise sales within the mall." they said.

"And couldn't that space be better used to advertise and sell gift cards that could be used at any of the malls stores" ----- and so on --- rumbled various store owners.

"What's the point of it" ---- grumbled others.

And there became quit a debate in the papers and in the town.

What's going to happen to the nativity ----- what are they going to do with Jesus?

The question became --- should the space be used for more sale items and advertising ---- in a mall already full of sale items and advertising ----- or -- ----- should the great big nativity scene that certainly didn't help sales increase --- stay right where it was.

And battle lines were drawn.

Get rid of it ----- who cares ---- and ----- no sir ---- not on my watch.

And in the end the community won --- the Christian community won ----- if that's even the right word.

In the end the nativity scene remained in the mall concourse.

One small hallelujah amen ---- I wonder if it's still there today.

I think the nativity battle in Guelph speaks to the cleansing and purifying and preparing that Mark is talking about harkening back to Malachi and Isaiah --- and pointing forward to Christ.

We are all called to purify ---- and cleanse ----- and prepare our society ---- our friends --- our family --- our co-workers --- our neighbours ---- ourselves ---- our mall perhaps even ----- for Christ.

For Christ's coming at Christmas ----- and for Christ's second coming at the end of time as we know it.

This past week Ellianna had her first appointment with the Optometrist --- and as is often the case in our family ----- we all went --- a Tait family trip -- - one for all and all for one ---- even for something as mundane as the Optometrist.

So Kate is with Ellie and the doctor ---- and Jeremiah and I are waiting in the sitting area --- and on this one table there was a kind of carousel ---- nut cracker kind of thing.

And basically it was nutcrackers of the 3 wise men with the gold and frankincense and myrrh in their hands all standing back to back in a circle with a wind up handle that caused them to spin around.

And it spun around so fast that it practically spun itself right off the table.

So naturally --- all the children ----- or at least the boys ---- loved it because it spun so fast it took out everything near it --- by smashing into it and causing things to fall all over the place.

So I was watching this one little boy wind it up and watch it --- and he had a bit of a confused look on his face as it whirled around.

And after watching it a few times he could see that I was observing him and he turned to me and said ----- “why do these kings have these gifts in their hands”.

So I said there’s a story in the Bible about some kings bringing gifts ---- just like those ones there ----- to Jesus when He was born.”

And the boy responded with ---- “Who’s Jesus.”

“Who’s Jesus.”

Well --- you should have seen the look at Jeremiah’s face.

Up to this point his face was buried in his Nintendo DS game --- but when he heard the boy respond with ---- “who’s Jesus” ----- his head popped right up and he gave me a look of total bewilderment.

Thankfully the boy didn't see Jeremiah's confused look ---- but just as I was about to answer with something like --- "the most important person in the history of the world."

The boys mom appeared ---- quickly smiled at me ---- and told her son -----
----- "hurry up we have to get home now."

And at first I was disappointed that the child didn't get to hear my answer.

Had I failed or dropped the ball --- opportunity lost.

But then I thought --- well maybe just maybe that's all God wanted me to do.

Maybe the point of the interchange wasn't to answer his question.

Maybe I did all I was called to do.

Maybe the point was to have that little boy go home and ask his mom or his dad or both of them ----- "who's Jesus."

Who knows --- only God knows and that's truly all that matters.

More than anything the point of the story is ---- we are all called to prepare the way for the Lord ----- so that when he does come again --- people will know Him.

And perhaps also --- more than anything else ----- the point of the story is ---
--- there are all kinds of people --- just like that little boy ----- who are asking ---- "Who is Jesus?"

Who is Jesus.

They may not find the answer at Wal Mart ----- or in the mall --- especially if there isn't even a nativity scene there.

They aren't likely to find the answer on T.V. ----- or on their tablet --- smartphone ----- or ipad.

**“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way ----
a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight paths for him’”**

We are to be those messengers.

We are the ones called to prepare the way.

We are to be the voices calling out from the wilderness ----- from behind the Christmas trees and consumerism.

We are the ones who are called to make some pathways for Christ --- pushing aside a little bit of wrapping paper and candy canes to make room for the manger and baby --- and the angels.

The coming of Christ is a purification of life.

Wherever Christianity comes it brings with it purification.

Scottish New Testament scholar Will Barclay said this --- in relation to our passage from Mark’s gospel today:

“Where Christ is allowed to come --- the antiseptic of the Christian faith cleanses the moral poison of society and leaves it pure and clean.”

Again ----

“Where Christ is allowed to come --- the antiseptic of the Christian faith cleanses the moral poison of society and leaves it pure and clean.”

I like that --- and it’s true.

“Where Christ is allowed to come --- the antiseptic of the Christian faith cleanses the moral poison of society and leaves it pure and clean.”

This cuts to the core of what Mark is speaking to in his gospel today.

Christ came to save the world ----- to make it pure and clean --- and to do away with sin having any kind of final or lasting influence.

In Advent we celebrate His coming --- His saving --- purifying --- cleansing presence coming at Christmas.

And of course in Advent we celebrate and we prepare ourselves --- each other ---- our culture ---- our society ----- for His second coming as well.

We are the messengers that Malachi ---- and Isaiah ---- and Mark ---- and John ----- are talking about.

John boldly announces in word and in deed ----- the One who is to come.

The One who ----- in his words --- verse 7 and 8 from mark's gospel today -- ----- is ---- “more powerful than I --- the one whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie --- the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit where I only baptize with water”.

Well folks ----- now is the time to prepare the way for the Lord.

In our hearts --- in the hearts of those we love ---- in the hearts of our neighbours --- co-workers ----- and so on --- in everyone we meet.

Now is the time to seize those little moments that God sometimes opens up to us ---- to share a word ----- or a gesture.

Maybe it won't happen the way we thought it would ----- or at the time we thought it would ----- or the way we imagined or hoped or prepared for.

But God is asking and equipping us to prepare the way for the Lord.

I thought I'd get a chance to answer that little boy's question ----- “Who's Jesus?”

But I didn't ---- and I had to walk away feeling a little unsure for a minute -- -- wondering if I had dropped the ball.

But of course I didn't drop the ball --- I simply did as I was called to do --- I spoke up when the opportunity arose as best as I could.

And so now ----- I'm attending on the very next opportunity that God will bring my way to prepare the way for the Lord.

And so we all ought to be according to Malachi ---- according to Isaiah ----- according to Mark's gospel today ----- and most importantly according to God's will.

We're intended to follow John --- and to follow Jesus.

We're intended to prepare the way for the Lord.

And so we must --- in hope --- in peace ---- in joy ----- and in love.

**“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way ----
a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight paths for him’”**

aren't just words for John and other famous disciples and apostles ----- they are words for us too.

We're intended to follow John --- and to follow Jesus.

We're intended to prepare the way for the Lord.

In word and in deed.

Amen.