

MARK 1:1-11

PREPARING THE WAY, OUR JOURNEY BEGINS

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

¹ *The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² 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 desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'* "

⁴ *And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and 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 will come one more powerful than I, the thongs 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."*

The Baptism and Temptation of Jesus

⁹ *At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

As we come together for this Second Week of Advent, we should feel truly blessed to celebrate the young men and young women who, today and into the New Year, will be affirming their baptism through the confirmation of their faith in Jesus Christ. We have had 20 students engage in our confirmation classes and student retreat over the past few months. As we celebrate with them, we can reflect on today's passage recognizing that their spiritual growth journey as disciples begins with a renewed resolve to follow Christ as their Lord.

I want to begin by sharing a few thoughts from our confirmant's when asked what confirmation means to them:

- For one: *"Confirmation is not the end of our spiritual walk; in fact, it is just the beginning. Confirmation means to publicly announce and confirm your faith. As Lutherans, we get confirmed at a fairly, young age. For me, it is the beginning of my spiritual life because I will be 14 when I get confirmed, which means that I have a whole life ahead of me. Though I should already be striving to live a life that pleases God, being confirmed means that everyone knows that I will dedicate my life to trying to do that."*

- For a second student: *"Confirmation is another step for my growth in my faith in God. Confirmation has helped me understand and learn more about how to be a better follower of God. It has helped me understand more about how much God loves me and how much he has done for me. The process for getting confirmed has strengthened my relationship with God and helped me keep Him at the center of my life."*
- As another student shared, *"To explain it in a sports analogy, confirmation is like draft night. We look at those being drafted and know they have been practicing for their whole lives... For our confirmation students, they went to Sunday School, Youth Group, Bible camps, a communion class, and even a confirmation class to prepare themselves for this day when they get confirmed... After someone is drafted, they have to prove why they were drafted, on the court, field, or the ice rink. Being drafted is just the beginning of an athlete's career. For the people getting confirmed, their confirmation day is the beginning of their quest to please God. Now, they will have to begin to live it out. Confirmation is a big deal, because it means that those getting confirmed want to live their lives for God, every day, forever."*

What powerful words directly from our students! Parents, family members, friends, and all of us here at St. Tim's should be confident in this – our students are truly His disciples! When we look at today's passage in Mark, we see that our spiritual understanding is a big deal. This passage shows us the **"beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God."** We see John the Baptist prepare the way for Jesus to begin his ministry and move forward over the next three years to fulfill his calling and complete the initial mission God, the Father, assigned to him.

For Mark, the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ was the preaching of John the Baptist who serves as a direct revelation of the prophecy from Isaiah. God brought John into this world for this very purpose. Here on the Jordan River, he declares with boldness the mission the God has given him. *"After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs 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."*

As John fulfills his mission, He brings us to a better understanding of the journey God has for each of us as we daily confirm our faith and seek to grow spiritually. God calls us to following:

- Repent and Receive (Repent of Sin / Receive Forgiveness)
- Recognize and Resolve (Recognize Jesus / Resolve to Follow Him)
- Rejoice and Reveal (Rejoice in Christ / Reveal Him to Others)

This is the most important take-away I have for you today. {REPEAT THE CALL}

WE ARE CALLED TO REPENT OF OUR SIN AND RECEIVE GOD'S FORGIVENESS

John is "*preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" For each of us, God calls us to a heart of repentance. He calls us to turn from our sinful ways and, as we do so, to receive the forgiveness that God promises. Repentance is an important word for us to understand, because it is the foundation of our redemption. Repentance literally means, "to think differently, to turn, and to change our minds." John declares here that in preparation for the coming of Christ we need to think differently about the life we are living, we need to change our mind about how we view our sin, we need to turn to the Lord for answers.

We must consider what it really means to repent. The call to repent does not mean to be sad when we offend others by our sins. A repentant heart does not mean we are upset when others catch us or call us out when we behave in sinful ways. That would be remorse, not repentance.

True repentance means to change our thoughts and our actions when we see our sin for what it is. In repenting, we no longer view sin as something that is fun or exciting, or something that we cannot help. We no longer see our sinful actions as harmless in their outcomes. When we repent, we see sin for what it truly is – sin is something that damages our relationship with God and our relationships with others. God's response to our changes in thoughts and behaviors is His complete forgiveness.

WE ARE CALLED TO RECOGNIZE JESUS AND RESOLVE TO FOLLOW HIM

As Jesus came to the Jordan River, God provides the opportunity to all those being baptized that day to see Jesus for who he truly is. We see God, the Father, and the Holy Spirit present as God reveals his pleasure when Jesus responds to the call for baptism. For everyone baptized alongside Jesus, they witness God's loving response. As God declares through the Holy Spirit for all to witness, "*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*"

As those repenting for their sins see Jesus baptized, they immediately recognize who He is and they resolve to follow Him as He begins His ministry to reach the lost and those who seek him. As we look upon each of those affirming their Baptism today, I am confident that God is washing these same words over each them. "*You are my child, whom I love and with you I am well pleased.*" As we bear witness to these students today, we can be confident that they have recognized Christ as their Lord and they have resolved to follow him as they grow spiritually into young adults. We can see this in their stated beliefs.

- One student says, "the number one thing I believe in is God and His Son, Jesus Christ. I do believe that God made this universe from his own two hands; I do believe that he walked on this earth, and I do believe that He will come again to judge the living and the dead. God is such an amazing part in our life... He shapes the way we do the things we do. He shapes the choices we make and He shapes the way we spend our days." Can you hear the words of recognition and resolve? Can you hear God's voice responding, "*You are my child, whom I love and with you I am well pleased.*"

- Another student shares, "I believe Jesus is the Son of God, who came to earth to save us and forgive our sins. Our sins were paid for when Jesus died on the cross and there is nothing we need to do to earn our place in heaven. I believe the Bible is the true Word of God and that we should live our life according to Scripture. I believe the Holy Spirit is with us each and every day to keep us close to Jesus.
Can you hear the words of recognition and resolve? Can you hear God's voice responding, "You are my child, whom I love and with you I am well pleased."
- A third student resolves, "I believe that God loved us so much, that He sent His only Son to earth to die for our sins. I believe that even though we don't deserve it, Jesus forgives and saves all believers from sin and death. I believe that on the third day after Jesus died, He rose again and is now with God. I believe that the Holy Spirit lives in all believers and empowers us to live out Godly lives, and that God calls us to be kind to others and to spread the word of His kingdom. God wants us to be a light in this world so others see Him through us, and that others come to know Him."
Can you hear the words of recognition and resolve? Can you hear God's voice responding, "You are my child, whom I love and with you I am well pleased."

WE ARE CALLED TO REJOICE IN CHRIST AND REVEAL HIM TO OTHERS

God desires us to rejoice at the forgiveness that Jesus won for us on the cross. As we have learned from our students, God does not want us to wallow in pity for the sins that we commit; He does not want us to fall into despair; He simply calls us to repent and receive His forgiveness. He wants us to know and believe that He alone has provided the resolution we need.

God has not only granted us forgiveness through His Son, Jesus Christ. Through Christ, God gives us the promise to wash and seal us with the gift of the Holy Spirit. John tells us God brought him to baptize with water, but Jesus would baptize us with the Holy Spirit. John is speaking to the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 when Jesus would visibly pour out the Holy Spirit on his disciples.

God assures us through Christ's own words that He has poured out this same Holy Spirit on each one of us as we respond in baptism and confirmation in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Anyone who is baptized in Jesus name can be certain that he has the gift of the Holy Spirit because we can only make such a confirmation of our belief when the Holy Spirit has created the faith in our heart to do so (1 Corinthians 12:3).

Just as God called John to prepare the way for Christ's baptism, God has also called us to prepare the way of the Lord for His second coming. We the church, are to grow spiritually together. We are to know the Lord personally, grow in Christ more deeply, and go in the Spirit to reveal Christ in our daily lives to the world around us.

Let me close by sharing some more of the words from our students as they come to affirm of their baptism today and reveal to us how Christ will be at work in each of them on the journey that lies ahead:

"Confirmation means that someone wants to live their life for God, so what one does after their confirmation is very important. I will continue to grow in my faith by going to church, being involved in church activities, and just helping others in general... Doing things like this [where I can serve others] has helped me to see the world through a different point of view and be thankful for all that I have...

I will continue to be kind and rely on God for help... Through my actions I will try to show God's love. I will try to help those who need it. One day, when I get married and have kids, which is a scary thought, I will teach them about God and make sure that they are involved in the church. During all of those times, I will read the Bible. Also, I know that there are going to be hard times in my life, and once those storms pass I will probably become stronger in my faith. As I have said many times, being confirmed is just the beginning of my spiritual walk, and it will encourage me to grow in my faith.

What beautiful insights from our students. The truly know Christ came to save us. He will come again to call us home. God calls to rejoice in His first coming and to reveal His second coming through our daily interactions with others. Like our students standing before us today, I pray that each of us will reflect each day and look to the Lord to:

- Repent and Receive (Repent of Sin / Receive Forgiveness)
- Recognize and Resolve (Recognize Jesus / Resolve to Follow Him)
- Rejoice and Reveal (Rejoice in Christ / Reveal Him to Others)

Being a disciple, a follower of the Christ, first begins as we change our hearts and turn to Jesus, continues as we accept His forgiveness. When we recognize Him as Lord, He then baptizes us with His Spirit who helps us to resolve to follow Him the rest of our lives. Finally, Christ calls us to rejoice in Him and reveal Him to the world. He desire us to share, to proclaim his name, to bring forward His message of love and forgiveness to all those around us. Let us pray.