**Mark 1:1-8 December 6, 2020**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

 Our text for this morning comes from the Gospel of Mark the 1st chapter here re-reading these words. “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, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

 Our readings this morning offer two very different pictures of preparation. On the one hand we have Isaiah. Here we find the imperative commands of God to comfort the people. It is an explicit order to speak tenderly to Jerusalem and let her know that peace has come at last. On the other, we have John the Baptist. Mark isn’t as lengthy as the account in Luke, but Mark does include that John was a wild man. A rough man, who was clothed with camel’s hair, who ate locusts and wild honey. He doesn’t come with a message of comfort, he comes proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Matthew shows us a more vivid picture of John the Baptist in His Gospel in chapter 3 where he calls the Pharisees a brood of vipers. Where he tells them imperatively to bear fruit in keeping with repentance, and finally he warns them that the ax is laid to the root of the tree, and any tree that doesn’t bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

 Isaiah comes with comfort, John comes with fiery commands of “repent”. So….why are these readings found together? Obviously, Isaiah talks about John the Baptist and Mark refers to Isaiah. Isaiah writes “A voice cries in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” And Mark echoes those words, writing that John is the fulfillment of this prophecy. The truth is they aren’t contradictory, God here isn’t speaking out of both sides of his mouth, they are complimentary. They both are working toward the fulfillment of the same goal, which is ultimately, repentance and preparation. All three texts this morning speak about repentance. Isaiah “that her iniquity is pardoned.” 2 Peter “but that all should reach repentance.” Mark 1 “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”

 The theme that reveals itself is the idea that a winding and crooked path is made straight. That imperfection is made perfect thanks to God. Is that possible for us though? Can we truly be made perfect after all of the sinful and shameful things we have done? After all, faced with the truth that we’ve studied the past few weeks, that the end is truly coming, and that we have been saved by Christ, Peter asks a perfect question in our Epistle reading. He writes that “Since all these things (meaning the heavens will be destroyed and everything that we know and experience on this Earth will be changed in an instant) are thus to be dissolved, ‘what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of the Lord.? What sort of people should we be? How should we be preparing for this glorious moment when God returns to take us to be with him?

 First and foremost we should recognize the words that John the Baptist shares with us today. Because he didn’t come to tell the people that they were fine where they were in life. He didn’t come to just pat them on the back and make sure they knew that they were a-okay for Christ’s ministry and His coming into the world. No He came, to tell them the opposite. He came to show them their sin. He came with fire and a stern warning that the ax was laid to the root of the tree and that those who were not worthy and who would not repent would be burned for all eternity. Now those aren’t comforting words, but it was the truth. And the truth is what those people needed to hear.

 So, what sort of people should we be? Well….what sort of people are we? Do we read the Commandments of God and simply see them as suggestions? Do we even hear the call to repentance? Or are we offended that someone would dare to accuse us of anything? After all, if it’s not politically correct in our society today you can’t even say it. Soon you won’t even be able to think it without being publicly crucified for your beliefs or an opinion that doesn’t fit the approved standards of society. Do we simply dismiss the message of Repent and turn from your sin? After all it is easy to say you’re sorry and not mean it. It is easy to confess your sins on Sunday and immediately return to your sinful habits and addictions on Monday. Repent or burn in hell for all eternity. That’s John the Baptist’s message. And it is one, we too need to hear. It is one we need to take seriously to heart because when we puff ourselves up with pride, we only set ourselves up to fall. Fall into the temptation to believe that we deserve our salvation, that we deserve what we have, and that we are better than those around us.

 John the Baptist came to prepare the people and went so far as to say that all the work he did was nothing because one was coming who was mightier than him, the straps of whose sandals he wasn’t even worthy to stoop down and untie. John knew that in comparison to Jesus Christ, He was nothing. And we too should take that message to heart. We are called to live lives of humility, rather than self-exaltation, hear again the words of our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 40, especially verse 4: “every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low.”

 The truth is, Isaiah speaks comfort and John speaks repentance because the mighty need to be brought down. They need to have their sins exposed and their true nature revealed. The nature that they are NOTHING in comparison to Christ. That in their unrepentant sin they take their own eternal lives in their hands by rejecting Christ’s forgiveness and turning to their own vices rather than his salvation. To those people, the message is clear. Repent and turn from your own destruction, confess your sins and be forgiven by God who is merciful and just. Isaiah speaks a different message, to a different type of person. To those who are under the weight of sin and shame, who feel the guilt of their unrighteousness, they don’t need to hear the fiery call to repentance. They need to hear only the comfort that can only come from Jesus Christ and His message of salvation. Comfort, that’s what they need. Tender words that the Word of God is true and will never pass away. That the Word of God will stand forever to be the good news that is heralded from the mountain tops for all to hear. And that they are lifted up and exalted through the forgiveness of sins won for them on the cross by the perfect death of God’s own beloved son.

 Two different styles, one of comfort and the other of a harsh reminder of the truth, but both are done for the same purpose. To make the crooked path straight. To take your heart that is full of sin, shame, and imperfection and make it new through the blood of Jesus Christ. You, are a new creation in Christ Jesus, and you are prepared and made holy and perfect when He clothes you in His righteousness. When he makes You his own child. He has not abandoned you, he has not forgotten about you or turned a blind eye or deaf ear to your troubles, but He hears you. He takes care of you and will come to take you to be with Him forever. That is a truth that can bring a comfort that this world can’t possibly provide. For while this world will promise comfort in the form of happiness through fame, power, and material things, all of those comforts will eventually fade. They cannot sooth the needs of our souls, they cannot grant us lasting comfort that will stand the test of time. They are simply comforts of the flesh, and as Isaiah says “All flesh is like grass, and all it’s beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers the flower fades, but the word of God will stand forever.”

 He will stand forever. He will reign forever. He will bring a lasting and eternal heaven and Earth where we will live with him, forever. That is what is to come. Until that time, let us continue to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the baptism of repentance that John proclaims. Let us wait patiently and diligently to be found without spot or blemish, at peace like Peter reminds us. And finally, let us rejoice in the words of Isaiah, that we have received comfort, for our iniquity is pardoned, that our sins have been forgiven. That we who exalted ourselves have been humbled in order to save us from ourselves. That we who were low in our despair, have been exalted and made perfect through Christ’s holy blood. And that salvation is ours not on account of our own actions, but solely through the work of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.