

The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way" – "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him.'" And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Text: Mark 1:1-8 SS 12/4/11 Isaiah 40:1-11 2 Peter 3:8-14 Psalm 85
Hymns: 712, 707, 702, 305, 87

GOOD NEWS!

Dear fellow believers in the Christ Child,

So, how are things going for you? Do you know the story of Job in the Old Testament? Things started out great for Job. But very soon poor Job got one piece of terrible news after another. Thanks to sin, there's always plenty of bad news in the world. But God wants you and me to know from His Word today that He has Good News for us.

"I will send My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way" – "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him.'" Our Old Testament Reading from Isaiah is the prophecy, and our text is the fulfillment of the coming of John the Baptist. God sent John to tell the people that Jesus Christ, the promised Savior, had come. Why the need for John the Baptist to come before Jesus? It was because the people had waited so long for the Messiah to arrive. It had been about four thousand years since God first promised Adam and Eve to send their Descendant to be our Savior. It had been 400 years between the last Old Testament prophet and John the Baptist. So God sent John to let the people know that the Messiah had finally come. John really got the attention of the people, and so helped very much in preparing the way for Jesus.

John was an unusual figure. He didn't live in a city or anywhere near people, he lived out in the wilderness. John wore rough clothing made of camel hair. He ate locusts (grasshoppers!) and wild honey. It made the people very curious about him. But what really made them flock to John was his unique message. The Pharisees – the religious leaders of the day – were for the most part proud, self-righteous hypocrites. They taught the people that it is what we do that saves us. The Pharisees actually referred to the people as "sinners," offering them little hope of their salvation. But John's message from God was completely different. John confronted sin in everyone, but he also told the people the Good News of forgiveness and salvation in Jesus, their Savior.

When we're told that *"John ... came preaching"* in the desert, the word *"preaching"* in the original means *"heralding."* A herald did not announce his own message. He simply read what had been given to him. John didn't come announcing his

own message, as the Pharisees were doing. John was GOD'S messenger who preached the Word of God to the people.

We're told, "*John ... came preaching a baptism of repentance.*" We need to repent of our sins and believe in Jesus. Repentance means a complete turnaround; a 180° turn from going in one way to going the opposite direction. Repentance means a complete forsaking of our own goodness to save us, sincere sorrow over our sins, and trusting in Jesus alone to save us. Repentance is the determination, with God's help, to change for the better and live our life for Christ. GOD must work repentance in us. Listen to what He says through the Prophet Ezekiel, "*I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. ... You shall be My people, and I will be your God. I will deliver you from all your uncleanness*" (36:25ff.) All who reject Jesus and remain in their sins are going to hell. But all those who by God's grace live by faith in Jesus are going to heaven.

Matthew in his Gospel says that John told the people, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*" The promised Savior had come! At another time, John pointed out Jesus and told the people, "*Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" (Jn.1:29). Again, salvation isn't through anything we do, but through confessing our sins before God and believing in His Son. How wonderful to hear that people from "*the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to (John).*" It was a twenty-mile round trip, walking or riding an animal, from Jerusalem out into the desert for the people to hear John preach God's Word. Yet the power of the Word of God moved the people to come out to John in droves.

"*John came ... preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ... All the people ... went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him.*" At that time, Jesus had not yet established baptism as we know it, through which the Holy Spirit actually comes into our heart and creates faith or strengthens our faith in Jesus. But the people were used to religious washing of their hands and other things to signify cleansing before God. So they probably understood that John's preaching of repentance and his baptism signified being cleansed of their sin by God.

Our text says about John, "*It is written in Isaiah the prophet: 'I will send My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way' – 'a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him.'"*" We heard the entire reference in our Old Testament Reading from the fortieth chapter of Isaiah. There we see it describes the oriental custom of sending people before a king who was on a journey. They were to level the roads, lowering the high spots and raising the low spots, making the king's travel as smooth as possible. By comparing this to John's preaching, the Lord describes how He Himself must bring us low, or humble us, to see our sins. Then He can raise us up through the Good News of His forgiveness in the cross of Christ.

The 'temple' in which John preached this message from God was the wilderness. It's also a striking picture of the way the Gospel goes out into the 'wilderness' of sin – sin in the world and sin in our human heart. There are some who want all references to Christ and Christmas removed from our holiday celebration at this time of year. They don't understand that Christ and Christmas are what this holiday season is all about. For

those who don't believe in Jesus as their Savior, the celebration of Christmas has no real meaning. God saw to it that His Word went out to the people in the wilderness through John the Baptist so people could believe and be saved. God, at Christmas time and always, sees to it that His Word keeps going out into the 'wilderness' of the unbelieving world, because, as Scripture tells us, *"God wants all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth"* (1 Tim. 2:4).

God has caused His Word to take root and grow in what had been the 'wilderness' of our hearts. Through the Bible's message of repentance, God has led you and me to see our own sinfulness, and forsake our own goodness for our salvation. Through the Gospel – the "Good News" – God has brought us to place our trust in His Son, Jesus Christ, to save us.

It isn't enough to say we believe in god. Many people of many religions say that. James points out that even the devil and his fellow demons know there is a God (2:19). Believing in God means trusting in Him for our salvation. Saving faith is believing in the God who sent His Son, Jesus, to earth to be born of the virgin, Mary, die for our sins on the cross, and rise bodily from the dead. Saving faith is the confidence in our heart that all of our sins have been forgiven and we are going to heaven solely because of what Jesus Christ has done for us.

One way in which God works this faith in us is through baptism. John told the people, *"After me will come one more powerful than I" (namely, Jesus), "the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."* The first chapter of Acts informs us that this refers first of all to Jesus' special outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples on Pentecost. John also refers it to baptism. All WE can do is perform a baptism with water and God's Word. JESUS works through His Word spoken during our baptism to put His Holy Spirit into our heart. The Holy Spirit gives us faith in Jesus, or strengthens our faith in Jesus, through our baptism. Titus 3:4-5 tells us, *"(God) SAVED us, through the washing of rebirth" (that's baptism!) "and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior."*

As long as we're in this sinful world, there's always going to be bad news. When things were so bad for Job, where did he turn? To his Savior: *"I know that my Redeemer lives"* (Job 19:25). The message of Christmas is that God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to be our Savior. Repent of your sins and believe in Jesus for forgiveness and salvation. Jesus is taking us out of this sinful world one day, into the eternal joys of heaven! THAT is **GOOD NEWS!** Amen.