

Title: *Get Ready*

Text: Mark 1:1-8

I always enjoyed listening to Paul Harvey go behind the scenes to tell us “the rest of the story”. Facts about historical events that maybe we hadn’t heard or considered before.

We all know about Isaac Newton's famed encounter with a falling apple. Newton discovered and introduced the laws of gravity in the 1600s, which revolutionized astronomical studies. But few know that if it weren't for Edmund Halley, the world might never have learned from Newton.

It was Halley who challenged Newton to think through his original notions. Halley corrected Newton's mathematical errors and prepared geometrical figures to support his discoveries. Halley coaxed the hesitant Newton to write his great work, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*. Halley edited and supervised the publication, and actually financed its printing even though Newton was wealthier and easily could have afforded the printing costs. Historians call it one of the most selfless examples in the annals of science.

Newton began almost immediately to reap the rewards of prominence; Halley received little credit. He did use the principles to predict the orbit and return of the comet that would later bear his name, but only after his death did he received any acclaim. And because the comet only returns every seventy-six years, the notice is rather infrequent. Halley remained a devoted scientist who didn't care who received the credit as long as the cause was being advanced.

Others have played Halley's role. John the Baptist said of Jesus, "He must become greater; I must become less." Barnabas was content to introduce others to greatness. Many pray to uphold the work of one Christian leader. Such selflessness advances the kingdom.

There was perhaps never a more selfless person than John the Baptizer. I call him that, so that we'll realize he wasn't really a Baptist like you and I are Baptists. He came as the forerunner, the divinely appointed one who would prepare the way for God's messiah.

How would John prepare the way? I've preached on him recently, so it's hard to know what I haven't said and to know how to present it anew and afresh so that the significance of his life and ministry is not lost on us. How is it that a man like John the Baptizer could have the impact that he did?

You could say that he was a wild man. He was out in the wilderness preaching a hard message. He wasn't like a highly trained preacher with great rhetoric preaching a message of possibility thinking or how to have *Your Best Life Now*. You could say, in fact that's exactly what he was doing; telling people how they really could have the best life possible, he just wasn't soft-pedaling any of it at all.

There was spiritual hunger in hearts of the people. Have you ever gone to the refrigerator, late at night and just stood there at the door while you looked to see what was there. On the bottom shelf is the meat loaf that was left over from this evening's dinner. "Too heavy," you say, "if I eat that this time of the evening I'll never get to sleep." In the fruit and vegetable drawer there are some carrots but they don't excite you. There's some oranges there that you know really need to be eaten but that's just not what you were hungry for either. You wanted something sweet and someone else beat you to the last piece of the cake that was left over from dessert. You did have some Oreos but you ate all of them because you're trying to lose weight and you didn't want to be tempted by them any more. The only cereal you have, other than the children's sugar-fortified cereal which turns your stomach to think about, is oatmeal and that's just too bland. It's a good low-cholesterol breakfast but hardly an appetizing bedtime snack. There's just enough milk for breakfast so you know you'll catch heck for drinking the milk unless you make a

quick trip to the store first thing in the morning to get some more. You're really in quite a fix. You're hungry for something but you just don't know what.

That little scenario can be a parable about our lives. We want to feel love and acceptance but they can seem so elusive at times. We long for fulfillment in our work -- to put our hands to doing something that will really make a difference in people's lives -- but more often than not it seems our work becomes a drudgery and we wind up just putting in our time until retirement, which really is too far away to seriously think about. You're hungry for something to give your life meaning but you're not sure

He will cleanse you from your sin and will fill you with the indwelling power to live a life in harmony with God's purpose for you. Isn't that what you're really hungry for?

Mark is writing to present the story of Jesus Christ. There are believers in Rome who are Gentile believers in Jesus Christ who need to know the true story of this man's life and what he did. One acronym I've heard from Mark's name is Mighty Acts of a Real King. It's interesting that Mark doesn't go into all of the birth narratives that the other 3 gospel writers do. It's as if he's in such a breathless hurry to give us all of the events and facts of Jesus' ministry that he just can't be bothered with anything that, in his mind, we don't really need to know.

One thing that we do know about Jesus' appearing is that he came into a world of great spiritual hunger. There had been prophecies that one day, God's Messiah would come. There had been 400 silent years since the time of Malachi, the last of God's Old Testament prophets. His last written prophecy says, "<sup>5</sup> See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. <sup>6</sup> He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."

There is this hope that someone will come. That one will come who will liberate God's people. Mark writes to tell us about him. This opening passage tells the story of John, but really the focus is to be Jesus. Notice Mark's first verse, "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Then he merges several Old Testament quotes that tell about one who would come to prepare the way for God's Messiah. There's the Malachi quote I just referenced and then there's the quote from Isaiah, "<sup>3</sup> A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. <sup>5</sup> And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Isaiah said to the people of his day, "The glory of the Lord is about to be revealed." He was speaking in the context of being allowed to return home after the exile. They would see the glory of the Lord in that momentous event in their nation's history. That was one act of God's deliverance on their behalf. Now, Mark, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is able to see that a greater and a more ultimate deliverance is coming in the person of Jesus Christ.

I've always pondered what it means to "prepare the way of the Lord". It's not that my doing anything will cause him to come or not to come. He is coming so the preparation is for me to be prepared for him to come. I know what it means for me now in my situation and in my context. When I preached on John back during the Advent season, I asked, "If you knew that Jesus Christ was coming to visit your house tomorrow, what would you do today to prepare for his coming?" Would you give the house a good, thorough cleaning? Would you go in all the corners and every little ridge or indentation in the baseboards and give them a good, thorough dusting? Would you take stock of the refrigerator and get rid of those leftovers from 3 weeks ago that are starting to get fuzzy? Would you organize your bookshelves and the

magazines on your coffee table and would you have to go through and say, 'I don't think this one should be here if Jesus is coming over'?

If Jesus Christ now lives in your heart, what do you need to do with your life so that it may be a suitable residence for him? What cobwebs are in the corners of your heart that need to be removed? What unforgiveness or bitterness would make his stay unpleasant? What besetting sin is there that would prove to be embarrassing? We can't hide anything from him. He already knows what is there.

We can imagine for us what it would be like to get our house and our heart ready for Jesus. The people of John's day were looking for their deliverer. It is interesting that even after Jesus' ministry and his death and resurrection, right before his ascension, the disciples who should have known better asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" When people of Jesus' day thought of a Messiah, that's what they thought. There was more to it than just the political aspect of it. There was spiritual hunger as well. There was a rabbinic saying that if Israel could keep the Torah perfectly for 24 hours, then Messiah would come. Therein lies the dilemma. If they could keep the law perfectly for 24 hours, they could keep it for 48 hours and then for 72 hours and the Messiah would not be necessary.

The people of Israel had been through some tough times. There was the Maccabean rebellion in about 160 B.C. There was the profaning of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes at the same time when the people were forbidden to participate in any of the temple rites. The 400 silent years didn't come about because the people were doing so well spiritually and didn't need to be spoken to. God had his own reasons.

Into this spiritually hungry time, comes John the Baptizer. John came and he was out in the desert region baptizing. He was in the wilderness where the prophets also had ministered. Elijah had lived by the Brook Kerith and was there fed by ravens. In fact, the comparisons to Elijah are striking. Elijah had also worn clothing made of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist.

As I think about John's ministry, there is one phrase that has stuck in my mind was the phrase "preaching a baptism".

What is striking about that phrase is the object of the verb "preaching". If I say I'm going to preach you may think, he's going to preach a sermon but the object of the verb to preach is usually the gospel. Usually we say he preaches the gospel. One of the high privileges of the ministry is having the opportunity to preach the gospel. I don't usually think of my calling in terms of preaching a baptism of repentance. After all, a "baptism of repentance" seems so negative. Gospel means "good news". I want to be the purveyor of good news so I prefer to be thought of as one who preaches the gospel. What's the difference between me and John? (There were a lot of differences I'm sure) Was John just an excessively negative person? Was he like some preachers I have known who seem to take a perverse sense of pleasure in preaching condemnation and judgment so hot and heavy every week so they can watch their congregation squirm? No, I don't think so. John was preaching the most positive message he had but the problem was, he didn't have a positive message to preach. He couldn't preach the gospel because he didn't have the gospel. He came as one who says, "I've got some good news and some bad news but I've got to give you the bad news before you can hear the good news."

John probably wanted to preach a gospel but there was no gospel to preach. The preparatory work had to be done. The good news is help's on the way but the bad news is you're not ready for it. John says, "You are a sinful people that needs to repent in order to be ready for the coming of the Messiah." All of the Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. They confessed

their sins and were baptized in the Jordan River. They were hungry for something and they may not have been able to put their finger on just what it was but once they heard John preach, they knew instinctively that was what they wanted. William Barclay says, "[John's] message was effective because he told people what in their heart of hearts they knew and brought them what in the depths of their souls they were waiting for." Some scholars estimate that John baptized as many as 300,000 people.

What is there in John's message that would create such a desire to go hear him. I heard one interesting perspective as I was preparing this sermon. That is, though John's message seems tough and unyielding, he really was preaching a gospel of grace. John was just torturing them with how bad they were. He wasn't setting some impossible standard for them to measure up to. He was actually giving them hope. In his message, we see the arrival of grace – the unmerited favor of God. He's saying, "God is about to come and move on your behalf."

The people of John's day knew instinctively that there was something wrong. They had heard the stories of their nation's glorious past. They remembered how Moses led them out of bondage in Egypt and how an out-gunned army was victorious over the mighty Pharaoh. They learned about David, the man after God's own heart. They read the law and the prophets. They had a particular interest in books like Daniel that seemed to have a unique message for the times they were in. They read prophets like Amos, Habakkuk, Micah, and Malachi and wondered why there didn't seem to be any more words from the Lord. God had promised to send a Messiah but messiahs seemed to be a dime a dozen any more. That's why it's truly remarkable that John attracted the kind of interest that he did. I wouldn't have blamed the people if they had become jaded and skeptical of religious figures who seem to be larger than life.

But there were some who were so hungry that they went out to him and heard the message of repentance. For John, repentance connoted much more than just sorrow or remorse. It's possible to feel very sorry for sin without truly repenting. John's baptism and John's concept of repentance included the reorientation of one's total life. There really cannot be a more appropriate message as we gather around the Lord's table this morning. We remember the broken body and shed blood of our Lord. We recognize that it was our sin that made it necessary for him to suffer. As we ought to be prodded in our hearts, pricked in our conscience, and stimulated in our thinking to find ways to reorient the priorities of our life toward the purposes of God for us. We not only acknowledge our sin but we turn from it and grieve that it was our sin that crucified the lord of love.

John's hearers didn't know that Jesus was going to be crucified or just what repentance would entail for them. There was a rabbinic statement that "if Israel would only keep the law of God perfectly for one day the Kingdom of God would come." They couldn't perfectly keep God's law but walking uprightly before God was a necessary prerequisite to God's coming. Maybe John's repentance prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah because it reinforced the idea in the minds of the people that were going out to John that they couldn't perfectly keep God's law in their own strength. John's baptism couldn't give them that power. They needed something greater to happen.

That's why John's message was, "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." John says "I'm incapable of producing the changes in your nature that empower you to live a life that is more fully pleasing to God." He says, "I don't have that kind of power but the one who comes after me does. I can't even stoop down and untie his sandals. I baptize you with water and that's important but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

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