**Mark 1:1-8**

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. **2**  As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, **3**  the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’ ” **4**  John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. **6** Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. **7** And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. **8**  I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

**“Unraveling Hope”**

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. This time of the year brings many highs and lows. Highs include those things like shopping for the right present, going to a Christmas concert at the school, or just enjoying all the decorations and music. Lows would be those things like having to deal with sickness or a tragedy, suffering grief over a loved one no longer present, or feeling plain empty even when everything else appears just right. Here is what makes celebrating Advent special for us in the Church. In the midst of the highs and lows of Christmas this and Christmas that, a voice of hope cries out to make straight, “a highway for our God.”

Advent seeks to set hearts and minds on Jesus. The child of Mary is far from that baby in a manager. He has made all things new out of His death and resurrection. As it was for John the Baptizer over the One who came, so now the Gospel continues to prepare any for the One who comes. More than facing updates in the world is to know God says it is coming to an end. Like pulling a loose string on a sweater, the curse that pulls upon this creation has no final hope to offer anyone. Yet, the apostle Peter tells us where true hope rests, “But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” Unraveling hope for our time, as in any time, always means that voice that leads you to Jesus.

There are plenty of hopeful voices in every age. Before the appearance of John the Baptizer, much had already taken place. During this time of silence by God of about 400 years was by no means silent. A world of the east based in Persia transferred to be a world of the west based out of Rome. Those seeking to preserve the Hebrew Bible saw it hopeful to translate into Greek. Others looked with hope to the Sanhedrin that oversaw the religious and civil matters in Judea. Many Jews joined the Greek way of life looking at it to be a hopeful way to by the times. Yet, for all that was happening among men God’s Word gave the only hope filled answer. “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”

Seismic shifts are what we face today, not merely in our culture but throughout the world. For all the talk about keeping up with technology, it really is only a small piece of the pie. Truth be known. No one knows where it is all going and anyone who thinks otherwise is arrogant and pretending to be God. These are exciting times but also times of great distress. Hope is being sold in all kinds of ways from products, to political policies, and plenty of false preaching. If last week we prayed for God to “stir up your power and come,” today we pray for God in our time to “stir up our hearts to make ready the way of His only begotten Son.” In other words, the only true hope we have is from what God says. Adam and Eve heard this Word in the Garden. Isaiah promised John would, “prepare the way of the Lord.” Jesus the Word made finally tells us, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Luke 21:33).

Having established true hope to be in God’s Word is not enough. Only one voice cries out with hope in the wilderness. John did His work of “preparing the way” in a not so familiar area to the Jews. What drew them away from their comforts of home and false idols of hope? It had to be important since it has been estimated that John baptized some 200,000 to 500,000 people (Bul’s notes). The voice in the wilderness proclaimed, “…a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” For all the changes that had happened, nothing had changed. The guilt of sin remained meaning there was no hope in circumcision, sacrifice, or offerings. It was not about a social atmosphere where people could “fit in” because none did, but by baptism, all were prepared for the One fit to save sinners. John made a straight path for Christ to bring hope by his call to repentant.

John still cries out as the voice of hope today. By the preaching of Law, he draws us out to see the wilderness not of a place, but in ourselves. It is where we do what we want as if God does not matter. Our own selfishness claims a self-made glory. A recent survey shows how quickly offense will be over the call to repent. Only 18% agreed that, “Even the smallest sin deserves damnation,” while 67% agreed, “Everyone sins at least a little, but most people are good by nature.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Of course, without the Law to make straight the way of Christ into our lives there is no hope. As Luther confesses, “This repentance teaches us to discern sin: We are completely lost; there is nothing good in us from head to foot; and we must become absolutely new and different people” (Concordia 404). Newness will not come from our strength or hands, but finally baptism alone has prepared us for the Word made flesh.

The voice of John knows the only hope for any is fulfilled in Jesus. His whole purpose in preparing was for him to get out of the way. There would be no making a false idol out of this preacher. He said, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.” John saw no glory in himself as help for sinners. His only hope was to glory in the Lord who was the Lamb of God. St. Paul would later make the same confession, “For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Corinthians 4:5). Jesus sent out public servants of His Word and the Church still calls them today. It is the voice not of a business manager, counselor, or any other manmade title. It is hope to hear the voice of the true shepherd, to trust in God’s care by Word and Sacrament, and find fulfillment from what Christ alone gives you.

Likewise, John baptized with water to forgive sins, but the power of forgiveness finally came from Jesus. This is what the Son of God claimed and made known by His death and resurrection. He has unleashed a great gift that truly is the Comforter. The first sermon delivered this hope into a world without Christ. St. Peter proclaimed, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Baptism is the power of God now at work with newness in your lives. Repent and believe the Gospel. Christ makes His way into our hearts and minds daily. No longer are we lost in the wilderness of our sin, but can serve Him without fear for He forgives. The highs and lows we have hear the cry that comes out of Advent. Unraveling hope for our time, as in any time, always means that voice that leads you to Jesus. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.

1. http://ligonier-static-media.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/thestateoftheology/TheStateOfTheology-Infographic.jpg [↑](#footnote-ref-1)