**Mark 1:1-8 (ESV)**

“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.”

**“Jesus All Wrapped Up For You”**

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. Since we are all about recycling now days, I suppose it will eventually affect the holiday season. Wrapping paper and colorful bags seem like a waste. Most of it goes in the garbage. However, what is a gift if it does not come wrapped up as a surprise? Presents under the Christmas tree would not be as exciting to open when you had the whole season to stare at them. Children show the need for suspense. They peel back the wrapping paper to peak at a present or wake up early on Christmas Day to tear open those gifts. Whether or not the tradition of giftwrapping sticks around, we have an image for the season of Advent. It is a time of preparation. It is a waiting for the Day of the Lord. What a gift to be unwrapped when Jesus reveals His full glory as Savior and Lord of a sinful world.

 Unfortunately, many will see the Last day as anything other than Judgment and sorrow. It does not come wrapped up like a gift anybody else would give. So dismal the picture, it even can alarm Christians. Yet, the apostle Peter brings comfort, “…the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” In order to face the end, we need see what God gave at the beginning. This why St. Mark wastes no time and opens his words saying, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” There is no opening Christmas story to snuggle up to with a baby. We go straight to John the baptizer. The fire and brimstone is there, but so is the promise given in baptism. Just as people wrap up gifts, God loves to give the gift of His Son by calling sinners to repentance.

 John the baptizer was nothing less than a startling kind of wrapping paper used by God. Preaching in the wilderness with no wife or children, clothed in the smell of camel’s hair, and eating undomesticated food like locust and wild honey was really living off the land. The reaction to him would have been similar to what the king of Samaria asked about the prophet of God in his time. “What kind of man was he who came to meet you and told you these things?” They answered him, “He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist.” And he said, “It is Elijah the Tishbite” (2 Kings 1:7-8). Yet, unlike the wonders performed by Elijah, John did two basic things in preparing the way of the Lord. He baptized and preached. The call to repentance was a call to change your mind, to have remorse over our sinful condition. It was to believe baptism gave forgiveness of sins and people received this by confessing their sins. There was no other way to unwrap the gift God was giving of His Son.

 Rather than a sales pitch, true preaching of the Gospel is shocking to still hear. It puts in front of our face the full anger of the Law. We face John the baptizer in his glory during the season of Advent. What does he say? “You call yourselves Christians. No, you are not. You imagine your holiness and godliness is good enough, far from it. Forgiveness is freedom to confess your sins. Make room for the Savior. Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” We face this preaching daily in what God gives of His gift. The old Adam is to die by the promise made in baptism. It is what we confess at the beginning of Church service saying, “I am sorry, I repent, be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being.” Most take offense at this wrapping paper and refuse it. Others like it for a time only to reject when it is inconvenient. Yet, repentance turns us back to baptism. It changes the mind of sinners. Plenty forget the One who is giving the gift is God. He does not wish any to be without His Son. The wrapping paper is Law demanding confession of sins, but the gift is still absolution, forgiveness for sins. True repentance is sorrow that trusts in the Savior saying like the Psalmist, “Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved! (Psalms 80:3).

As startling as the wrapping paper is of John the Baptizer.

Be prepared for a more startling gift. God gives you Jesus. The whole point of preaching and baptizing was to point to the glory of salvation sent for sinners. John said, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” No body earned forgiveness by confessing sin as a work, but finally by confessing the work of Christ as the Word become flesh. As Isaiah proclaimed long ago about this gift, “The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together…” God’s Son wrapped in flesh and blood born of Mary was the gift sent by the Father. They could confess their sin because Jesus would carry all sin to the cross. John would later say it this way, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29) Baptism was more than a symbol, but a means of God’s grace for sinners. Jesus as the Word, unwrapped this promise in the water by His death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit confirmed what the Father gave of His Son for baptism was to go out to the ends of the earth.

 How much more value is the gift than the wrapping paper. John the baptizer knew this well saying, “He must increase, but I must decrease (John 3:30). You ever notice how some are so careful in opening gifts so as not to ruin the paper. Children spoil that picture, because they want to enjoy the present. We want to enjoy Jesus as Savior. Tearing apart the paper is to confess without hesitation that my sin, my shame, my ways have torn apart God’s Son. The judgment of the Law is to place it all on Jesus. There is no need to save the wrapping paper or try to keep it nice and neat. It serves no other purpose in the end. Only Christ is the gift given to sinners. His Word and Sacrament take precedence not my sin, not my life, and not my ways. Confessing our sins then is simply to confess that there is a greater savior. Repentance is the life of a Christian only because at the center is Christ. He comes today to give us this joy with His true body and blood in the Sacrament. Greater than John or any preacher of the Word is God’s Son. He cries out to forgive, strength, and save His baptized. In turn, the Spirit of salvation goes to work to bear good fruit in our lives.

Just as people wrap up gifts, God loves to give the gift of His Son by calling sinners to repentance. It is the answer to our prayers and what prepares us for the Last Day, whether it be the end of our life or the end of the world. All must fall apart in this sinful creation good and bad according to God’s judgment made in Christ. The wrapping paper cannot remain for the Laws of life are to give way to Him who is life. Luther knew the value of this gift God gave out of love to save sinners for Christ says,

“Therefore accept this coming as the coming of your redemption. For I come not to cast you into hell but to help you out of this shameful, sick, diseased, wretched world—to separate you from the devil and his slaves, and to place you among the angels, where you need not suffer but will live in eternal glory” (Plass 700:2179.)

What a gift of Jesus and the Father wrapped it all up for you to believe in His Son. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting, Amen.