

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

10th December 2023 – Second Sunday in Advent

Mark 1:1-8

PREPARE ...

Prepare. When you hear that word at this time of the year what do you think of? What kind of preparations have you made, are you making, or have you just thought, ‘ooh, I better get on to that’? Our preparations at this time of the year revolve around things like buying presents. Organising holiday and travel plans. Planning what to do when visitors come to us. Organising where we will hold our Christmas celebrations, what we will eat and drink, and who will do and provide what. Maybe also what will happen with our work over the Christmas break, and if we have children or grandchildren what we can do special for them. For many of us, in our society, it is a busy time isn’t it, a stressful time, and a time when it feels like there is so much to do to make everything go just right.

So much can and does happen at this time of the year that what this Christmas celebration is all about, and another kind of preparation we can make for it, can easily get lost. While we may take a month, or a couple of months those of you who are very organized, to make our Christmas preparations, the planning for the event which began it all took so much longer, in fact, many thousands of years. It goes right back to the very beginning, to when God first made people and they were in a perfect relationship with Him. But then when sin came along, that desire, that inclination, that often overpowering need to ignore God and other people and just selfishly focus on ourselves, that perfect and intimate relationship with God was then broken. God was still there with His love, we had moved away with our love now turned on ourselves.

God didn't like that. So, beginning way back then, and including promises like John the Baptist repeats in our reading here, God kept on promising to send the Saviour, the One who would repair this relationship by taking our place and paying the price for our sin. And the only One who was good enough, and pure enough, and perfect enough, to do that, was the Son of God Himself, Jesus. And now, despite the fact that throughout the Bible, and up to and including today, as people we all go through this constant cycle of receiving God's love, rebelling and turning away from Him, receiving God's love, rebelling and turning away from Him, receiving God's love, rebelling and turning away from Him, etc, despite that, because of Jesus God's love and forgiveness for us is always there. The preparations God made makes certain that what He wants to give us is always there for us when we turn to Him.

There are two main parts of this message of John the Baptist which we will have a closer look at here. The first is the call or command to 'Repent', or to 'Turn back to God'. Repent literally means to turn back, to change our ways, to do a complete turnaround in our life. One of the best stories of what repentance means from both God's side and our side is one Jesus Himself told; the well-known Parable of the Prodigal, or Lost, Son. It's the story of the young man who had grown up on the farm but longed for the bright lights of the city, so one day, he asked his father if he could have his inheritance now. He then went off to the city to party and live the good life, but soon discovered that money doesn't last forever, and neither do friends when the money has gone. Getting a job caring for pigs he found himself being envious of the food the pigs were fed. He thought to himself, 'I'll go back to the farm and my father; I'm no longer worthy to be treated as his son, but I'll throw myself on his mercy and ask to just be treated as one of his servants. So, he repented, turned around, and went back to ask forgiveness from his father.

The welcome he got from his father completely surprised him. That his son had come back to him was all that the father cared about as he restored the son back into his place in the

family and threw a celebration for him. That loving, embracing, welcoming, totally forgiving, picture shows how God welcomes us when we come to Him.

As we 'prepare', turn back, what are we being called to repent of and be sorry for, try to leave behind, so that our relationship with God can be as He wants it to be? For us this turning back is a daily, even more than daily, thing. Is it the feelings we have towards other people sometimes; feelings of impatience, intolerance, resentment, holding on to grudges? Is it the words we say which we know we shouldn't say but they just keep coming out; words which cause hurt and division? Is it the actions we do which put ourselves before others, or the actions we fail to do which stop us helping people? We all, at times, need to turn back to God in the way we fail to listen to and follow Him, in how we don't give Him the central place in our life. As we do this, we can think of this image; the image of the loving Father welcoming us home, forgiving us completely and absolutely.

The second message John talks about here is the place of Baptism in bringing us to God and joining us to everything Jesus has done for us. As John says here, he baptises with water, but the baptism of Jesus, the baptism we practice today, is with the Holy Spirit. When we witness a Baptism, as we do regularly in our worship services, we see people through the water and God's Word, by the power of the Holy Spirit, being joined to Jesus' dying and rising for us, and to the forgiveness that brings. That power of Baptism, and the assurance of God's love and forgiveness which comes with it, also helps us to transform our lives, to turn to God, to follow Him; knowing, being sure, that His love and forgiveness are always there for us.

Consider then, whether you can remember your baptism or not, God remembers it, what does your baptism mean for you, today? How does it give you strength knowing God's love and forgiveness for you? As a child of God, how are you now, as one of His children, now called to live in and for Him? Do your choices, your words, your actions, your priorities, reflect who, by Word, water, and Spirit, He has made you to be? The bond God made with you

through your baptism cannot be broken from His side; He's always there for you. It enables us to know that whatever we go through, whatever we feel, whatever we struggle with, He is there with us. And knowing that whenever we turn to Him we know we receive His full and complete forgiveness and that welcome back home, and all the blessings of love, joy, hope and peace He wants to give to us.

This is a time of preparation, in many ways, and as the song goes, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord!' And if that song gets stuck in your head that's ok: think about what doing that means for you. For thousands of years God was preparing to send His Saviour into the world, as a human being, so our relationship with Him could be restored. This wasn't just to have Him born in a manger, but through the door of His life to have Him die on the cross for our sins, and to rise so we can have new life also. And it's through this, and how we are now joined to this in our Baptism, that we can now follow that call to turn back and follow Him. It's the call to prepare by knowing God's love, and to both live in it and live it out every day. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Think about the preparations you make, both for Christmas and the holiday period. Are you someone who makes your preparations early, or do you just do them when they have to be done?
- Reflect on the preparations God made for the birth of Jesus. Go back to Genesis 3 and find the first promise God made to send a Saviour. What other promises of the Saviour can you think of from the Old Testament? If you have time do a search and look at some of them.
- In the midst of all the other preparations we do at this time of the year, how do we prepare the way of the Lord (as the song goes)? What thoughts/words/actions do you need to repent of and turn back from? If you find it difficult to let go of some of these, bring them to God in prayer and ask for His help to turn away from what is doing you harm and to turn back to Him.
- Think about your baptism. What does it mean to you? What strength and comfort does your baptism give to you each day, especially as you try to live your life following God? Thank God for the promises and assurances you have received in your baptism, and ask Him by the Holy Spirit to help you to live as who He has made you to be.

Pray: thank God for all the preparations He made in sending Jesus to be the Saviour for us all. Ask Him to help us to hold on to the grace of our baptism and live our lives following Him.

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler
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