

**Mark 1:1-8 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent**  
**December 4, 2011 – Senior Peter Zaferos**

Grace and peace to you, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It's that time of year again! Christmas music has been on the radio for weeks. Decorations are starting to go up. Thanksgiving and Black Friday have come and gone. It's starting to get cold outside and it's only a matter of time till the snow starts falling.

I love this time of year! Some of my fondest memories happened in the month of December. As a kid, it was all the things that went on during those few weeks of Christmas vacation. For one thing, there was no school! There were all the parties, the time with family...and I had twice the fun because my birthday is only a couple of days before Christmas☺. During the month of December, in a sense I could just sit back and enjoy the ride! I got to smell the smells, eat the food, hang out with family and friends, open a few presents...but I know I didn't appreciate the work that went on behind the scenes to make it all happen.

Now that I'm older, now that I have a family of my own, things have changed a bit. I can't just sit back and enjoy the ride anymore. If I want to smell the smells, and eat the food, and have an opportunity to see all the family and friends, and open some presents—if I want to experience those things, I have to do something to make it happen. If I want to smell all those cookies baking, my wife and I have to bake cookies. If I want to eat all the incredible food, my wife and I have to make it, or at least make sure we get the family to grandma's on time. If I want the opportunity to spend time with family and friends we all need to arrange our schedules just right so we're all in the same place at the same time. If I want my family to have the opportunity to open presents, I need to buy them and wrap them. And those pressures are now placed on top of school and work. Things have changed. There is a lot expected of me and my wife during this time of the year. Maybe you can relate.

As we wrap ourselves in the preparations needed to make Christmas what we want it to be, it's easy to lose focus of the preparations needed to make Christmas what *God* wants it to be. On top of the expectations that family and friends may have for us during this Christmas season, our God has expectations for us also. He expects us to be in His Word. He expects us to make sure our families are in the Word. He expects us to be attending worship services and to be coming for Lord's Supper. He expects us to be kind to those who aren't as fortunate as we are and so much more!! As we prepare for Christmas in an earthly sense, God also wants us to prepare for Christmas in a spiritual sense. Our God expects us to be good people!

The expectations God has for us as we prepare for Christmas really are no different from the expectations God had for His people in Old Testament times. As His people were waiting for the promised Savior, God wanted them to be good! God wanted Old Testament believers to eagerly await the arrival of their Savior! He wanted them to live their lives out of thanks for the promise He made to save them in the first place.

This connection we have with Old Testament believers helps us to understand why we often spend so much time in the Old Testament during Advent. Advent is the time of the year when we prepare ourselves to celebrate the birth of the Savior God promised so long ago. It's a time when we *wait* for Jesus to come! Do you see the connection? The entire Old Testament was also a time of preparation for the birth of the Savior. After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, God made a promise to send someone who would crush Satan's head. God promised to send a Savior, and from that time on, God's people were waiting for Jesus!

We see a clear example of God's people waiting for the Savior in our scripture readings for today. In Isaiah chapter 40, some 700 years before Jesus was even born, God made this promise to send someone who would prepare the people for Jesus' arrival. Then in our sermon text from Mark chapter 1, we see a portion of Isaiah chapter 40 quoted. Mark writes, **"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."** This prophecy from Isaiah points ahead to the person God promised would prepare the way for the Savior. You and I know that man as John the Baptist.

The fact that God promised to send a man to prepare His people for the Savior is important, but the real significance is found in the mission this man would have. If you just read this quote from Isaiah you might be left scratching your head a little, wondering exactly what this man did. You'd understand that he was sent to "prepare," but how did he go about doing that? What does "**make straight paths for Him**" mean? Verse 4 of our text makes the answer to that question pretty simple, "**And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**" John the Baptist was sent to prepare God's people by calling them to repentance. It's flushed out a little more in Matthew chapter 3 where John the Baptist is quoted saying, "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.**"

God's call through John is clear. There are no acceptable detours through the sinful pleasures of this life. The path of the person living in sin is a crooked path, and that path leads to destruction (Matt 7:13). There is *one* path to eternal life with God. It's a straight path, a path that has been cleared of sin's clutter, and a path that leads straight to God, with no distractions, whatsoever.

This is why God sent John the Baptist. God's people were living in a spiritual wasteland. Their paths to God were *not* straight. They were covered in the filth of their sin and they didn't even know it. They desperately needed the cleansing waters of baptism. They needed someone to call them out! Someone to say, "Wake Up!! You are living in filth!!" If God had not sent someone to call them to repentance, they would have completely missed Jesus. They would have seen no need for him.

The season of Advent serves the exact same purpose for us. During the American holiday season we are that much more susceptible to the "instant gratification" culture we live in. Even when we know we can't afford them, we'd much rather throw a few extra "gifts" on the credit card, rather than live a life that displays good Christian stewardship. And instead of working hard at whatever it is we do, we'd much rather "eat, drink, and be merry" with friends and family! Because after all, that's what this time of the year is all about! Right!?!? If God left me to myself, I'd prefer to simply enjoy myself during this Christmas season. If God left me to myself, the last thing I'd want to do is examine myself... "I mean, man! What a downer! Is this really what we're supposed to do during these weeks before Christmas? Why do we need to be so serious? Why do we need to dwell on sin? Why do we have to be so careful, so cautious as we celebrate?"

Well, what's the point of Christmas? Why did Jesus have to come in the first place? He had to come because Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. He had to come because every man woman and child born after them, was born covered in the filth of their own sin. That's why Jesus came! He came to pay the price God set for the sins of the world! Don't get me wrong, the fact that Jesus *was born* is something to celebrate! But the *reason* He was born *isn't!* If we aren't spending time in God's Word, if we aren't being convicted of our sin, if we aren't being called to repent... We begin to forget about our sin. We stop worrying about it altogether and soon enough we begin to forget we even need a Savior. Jesus comes at Christmas and we only see lights and glitter. Jesus comes at Christmas and all we can think about is that next batch of Christmas cookies coming out of the oven.

And so through the words of John the Baptist, God is calling us to repent of our sins. God is calling us to remember how serious sin is from His perspective. He's calling us to take a look at our own lives and identify the sins we've committed. He's calling us to regret what we've done and say "I'm sorry." He's calling us to leave sin behind, even though that's really hard to do. But realize, repenting is more than simply turning away from sin. When we repent we also turn toward Jesus. And when we turn toward Jesus we see everything that he's done for us. When God calls on us to repent, he's not simply trying to make us feel bad. God calls on us to repent so that we can see Jesus.

So where does that leave us during this Advent season? Are we to sit here in misery? Are we to sit here and say "Woe is me?" What is the point of all this? Brothers and sisters, you have a God who cares about your soul so much that He will not let you forget about your sinfulness! Because it is when you see your sinfulness most clearly that you also see your God's grace most clearly. It is when you see your sinfulness most clearly that you realize exactly why Jesus came.

Brothers and sisters, Listen to God's call! Repent of your sins and turn away from them. Look down the straight path that lies before you! See your Savior!!! He's coming!!!

Amen.