

## A REALLY WHITE CHRISTMAS

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Mark 1:1-8

TEXT: *And he will go on before the Lord...  
to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.* (Luke 1:17)

### INTRODUCTION

Last Sunday, everything was beautiful with the wonderful snow we had. While I've lived my whole life in snow country, I never cease to be excited by the first significant snow and marvel at the change it makes in our landscape— from the dull browns and grays of bare ground and trees to sudden brilliance in whiteness. Then, this last week, Polly and I went to Christmas concert in celebration of our 39<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It put in mind, through an effective arrangement, Irving Berlin's song, "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas." The next morning as I went to work on my sermon, my thoughts wandered from the sentimental lyrics of "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas" to the question of what does it mean to have a *really* white Christmas? I'm thinking of a Christmas whiteness that isn't about weather, but about hearts scrubbed clean, pure, without any darkness inside— the reason for Jesus' birth.

Of course, the words of the prophet Isaiah come to mind:

*"Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord.  
"Though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be as white as snow;  
though they are red as crimson,  
they shall be like wool."* (Isa 1:18)

Now I realize most of you are believers and know the power of God's work of grace through Jesus Christ in forgiving us all of our sins and giving us the assurance of eternal life. And you know that we don't have to make up for our sins. It is totally grace, totally free, and totally erases our sins forever, never again to be remembered or counted against us. But, even after our salvation and even though we regularly confess our sins to the Lord for ongoing forgiveness for when we stray, we often miss some of the deep, core issues and fall short of real purity of heart. We get careless and superficial in our view of sin. We rationalize our short-comings and in general get too caught up in this world's affairs— too busy to attend to what is most necessary. And because of that, our walk with Christ lacks power, depth, and the joy it is meant to have. John the Baptist comes to us to provide a needed corrective to snap us out of our complacency. It is a message the church has insisted belongs in Advent.

### A PEOPLE PREPARED

You can't get far in Advent without encountering John the Baptist. The story of Christ's birth and John's birth are intertwined. And, all the Gospels insist that before we come to Jesus and His ministry, we must first listen to John the Baptist. But, it is not an easy message to hear. It has a way of sapping what the world calls, "the Christmas spirit." His call for repentance sounds out-of-place with our holiday cheer and frantic pace at having a good time. Yet, his message is one we need to hear. How often do we come through the Christmas season exhausted, disappointed, and rather empty in our heart of hearts? That will always be the case unless we learn the wisdom

of what God teaches us in John the Baptist.

John has a narrowly focused mission: to prepare the way for Jesus' entrance into ministry and to point-out Jesus as the Messiah. I find his words a fresh challenge this morning I want us to take time to ponder his role and preaching.

The announcement by the angel Gabriel to Zechariah that his barren wife would finally, miraculously give birth to a son whom they were to name John, is accompanied by this prophecy:

*And he will go on before the Lord... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.* (Luke 1:17)

Each one of the Gospels give detail about what this means. Let's look at how Mark begins his Gospel—

READ: Mark 1:1-8.

This is the beginning of the Gospel (Good News) of Jesus Christ. His opening word “arche,” translated “beginning,” is unmistakable. It is the same word John the Apostle uses as he opens his Gospel, *In the beginning was the Word...*” The message to us is one of making straight paths for the Lord, through repentance for the forgiveness of sins and baptism. I'm afraid we often pass over this as applying to those who have not yet come to Jesus as their Lord and Savior. This morning, I hope we can see how important it is for all of us. I want to highlight five applications of this message of repentance:

1. It means letting go.
2. It enables us to will one thing.
3. It means real change.
4. It makes the crooked straight.
5. It never ends.

### **1<sup>st</sup>— LETTING GO**

Our society has become adept at adding things to our lives without our giving up anything. We live in a “both/ and” civilization that thinks it can have its cake and eat it to. We try to do it all, and have it all. Our houses, closets, garages, cars, and sheds are overflowing with stuff we keep adding. We keep finding ways to multi-task so we can do more things. And, we invent things so we can kind-of be in two places at once with cell phones, blackberries, and when we have to miss a TV program, we don't really need to, since we can record it while we are gone.

The spiritual life can seem like that as well. Almost everyone likes Jesus and wants Him to be a part of their lives. But, they also like a lot of other things, and other spiritual paths. They want to pick and choose what they want from what appeals to them. That also includes the moral standards they feel are the ones that are best for them.

The theologian, Karl Barth, asks, “Shall we never permit our hands to be empty so we can grasp what only empty hands can grasp?” There must be an emptying before we can be filled. And that is John's primary message, “*Repent, for the kingdom of God is near*” (Mt. 3:2). Repentance involves subtraction, letting go of self— my way. Now, when we first come to Christ, we may think of sin as primarily things we do in violation of God's rules. That is, of course, sin. But as

we are Christians very long, if we're paying attention, we'll begin to discern the deeper problem of self-will, self-absorption, self-in-charge, self-whatever. It was what Isaiah realizes when he cries out, *Even our righteous deeds are like filthy rags* (64:6). For instance, we do a good deed, then we find our heart secretly feeling pride at what we did and/ or we look with a critical spirit on others who are not doing as much. We overcome some besetting sin and feel quite pleased with ourselves—pride. We give a witness to some unbeliever, then can't wait to tell our Christian friend about what we did. A prayer concern for someone morphs into a chance to show our inside knowledge of the situation and/ or slips into gossip. There are so many ways that old sinful nature can still keep tripping us up, no matter how long we're following Christ.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> – TO WILL ONE THING

That is why John's call to repentance is so essential to keep heeding—especially as we think of Christmas. Our lives can easily become more harried and fragmented. We can be lulled into seeking happiness in things, food, friends, etc. We seek significance in our busyness. All this is a call to pause, and take time to evaluate and repent of what is rooted in the wrong thing—making ourselves the center and taking over God's place. There's a quote I like from Kierkegaard, "To have a pure heart is to will one thing." That one thing of course for the believer is God's purpose. It reminds us Jesus' words in the 6<sup>th</sup> Beatitude,

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

The Greek word for pure here contains the element of single-mindedness. We use pure in that way when we talk about pure water. We know what it is to be fragmented and pulled in many directions. But we also know the power of getting all our energies focused upon one great purpose. That purpose for us is Christ's call. The Message expresses this Beatitude as:

*You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right.  
Then you will see God in the outside world.*

When our hearts are pure, single in desire, we will begin seeing God all around us more and more. And, if we are not very aware of God and what He is doing, could it be the impurity of our hearts that is in the way?

## 3<sup>rd</sup> – REAL CHANGE

As I've often told you, repentance involves a choice, a turning. It means we realize the way we are going is wrong, so we change direction. It is not just feeling, but involves action. John the Baptist is clear in that as he calls upon people to *Produce fruit in keeping with repentance* (Mt. 3:8) It is not just remorse that makes no real change.

I came across that empty repentance in a story of a woman with fourteen children, ages one through fourteen. She decided to sue her husband for divorce on grounds of desertion. The judge asked her when he had deserted her. She replied, "Thirteen years ago." The judge responded, "If he left you thirteen years ago, where did all the children come from?" "Well," the woman said, "he kept coming back to say he was sorry."

Dallas Willard has a helpful illustration of this in his book, The Divine Conspiracy.

As a child I lived in an area of southern Missouri where electricity was available only in

the form of lightning. We had more of that than we could use. But in my senior year of high school the REA (Rural Electrification Administration) extended its lines into the area where we lived, and electrical power became available to households and farms.

When those lines came by our farm, a very different way of living presented itself. Our relationships to fundamental aspects of life— daylight and dark, hot and cold, clean and dirty, work and leisure, preparing food and preserving it— could then be vastly changed for the better. But we still had to believe in the electricity and its arrangements, understand them, and take the practical steps involved in relying on it.

You may think the comparison rather crude, and in some respects it is. But it will help us to understand Jesus' basic message [and for us this morning, John's basic message]: "Repent, for electricity is at hand." Repent, or turn from their kerosene lamps and lanterns, their iceboxes and cellars, their scrub-boards and rug beaters, their woman-powered sewing machines and their radio with dry-cell batteries.

The power that could make their lives far better was right there near them where, by making relatively simple arrangements, they could utilize it. Strangely, a few did not accept it. They could not enter the kingdom of electricity. Some just didn't want to change. Others could not afford to, or so they thought.

While that illustration applies primarily to our decision to receive Christ as Lord and Savior, letting Him be our source, we need to continue to apply it. We are ever in danger of disconnecting from the source and taking over. I was reminded of that line in the chorus we sing, "Be Magnified," by someone the other day, "Lord I've made you too small in my eyes, Lord forgive me." Don't we often do that and feel we must take over, — getting out our old kerosene lamps?

There is action required and taken as a result of John's preaching. People are repenting, confessing their sins, and being baptized. This is what is required for our lives to become a "way for the Lord." Jesus comes to soft, repentant hearts who are willing to change direction. He comes to hearts that have let go of self and are willing to embrace Jesus as their exclusive Lord. He comes to hearts that have been emptied so He can fill them with His purpose and glory.

In Luke's account of John the Baptist, he details the changes that should be made. Convicted by his preaching, the crowds asked,

*"What should we do then?"*

*John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same."*

*Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"*

*"Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.*

*Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?"*

*He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely — be content with your pay." (Luke 3:10-14)*

You can't get much more practical than that, can you? And notice two things:

1. Almost all the direction has to do with economics.
2. And, there are two groups here that most everyone considered "the enemy:" tax collectors and soldiers. Both were "traitors," working for the Roman occupying government. John doesn't say change careers. Interesting.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> – CROOKED MADE STRAIGHT**

Also the image of making a straight path for the Lord, quoting Isaiah's prophecy, bears a moment's reflection as well. Straight requires care and vigilance. We need a straight edge or straight line laser. Crooked lines, walls, roads, and paths are what we end up just left to ourselves. For those following, the more crooked, the more chance of missing a turn or getting off the road. We can also think of this applying to words, especially in this political season. Words manipulate, obfuscate, and deceive. As Prov 10:19 says, *When words are many, sin is not absent...* Don't we long for straight talk from those who would be our leaders? And with ourselves, we rationalize our behavior so it is not so bad, maybe a simple oversight or misunderstanding rather than something that needs to be repented of.

This repentance that John proclaims is also exactly where Jesus begins His ministry.

*After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"*

You can't miss it. It all begins with repentance.

#### **5<sup>th</sup> – IT NEVER ENDS**

And, this repentance is an ongoing process— daily if not more often. I can identify with the words of George MacDonald in his devotional reflections as he writes:

"With every morn my life afresh must break  
 The crust of self, gathered about my flesh;  
 That thy wind-spirit may rush in and shake  
 The darkness out of me, and rend the mesh  
 The spider-devils spin out of the flesh—  
 Eager to net the soul before it wake,  
 That it may slumberous lie, and listen to the snake."

Often I have gone to bed with a wonderful sense of God's presence, determined to do His will, only to wake up in the morning feeling like I never knew God's presence and all my resolve of the previous night evaporated. Thinking of MacDonald's images:

- "Crust of self" I picture the crust of ice on the bucket of water outside the door that forms on a cold night. It closes it in so it no longer feels the breeze that stirs other waters.
- And, "the mesh the spider-devils spin out of the flesh— eager to net the soul before it wake..." is likewise familiar.

Each time that happens, we must break through the crust and entrapping spider webs through repentance and realigning our ways with God's ways. Our weekly worship helps us do this. Our daily prayer and immersion in God's Word needs to be laced with generous times of confession

and Spirit-sensitized understanding of what is *really* going on. Along with this is the turning around of repentance for where we've gone wrong.

### **CONCLUSION**

I sometimes think the Christmas is a microcosm of the best and the worst. We see the best in our emphasis on family, friends, giving, beauty, blessing, joy, longing for peace, and all of it focused upon Jesus. But it is also a time of some of our worst behaviors: materialism gone wild, superficiality, excess in food and drink, rushing about seeking happiness in all the wrong things, stress, anxiety, and spoiled children.

It takes some doing, some deliberate action on our part to keep the best in the Christmas season. It doesn't "just happen." So, let's not just dream of a white Christmas. Let's look to our hearts and repent of all the ugly stuff, the sin, the misplaced priorities. Let's ask God this morning, in the words of David, to *wash me and I will be whiter than snow* (Ps. 51:7).