

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

DECEMBER 6, 2020

ST. PAUL'S LUTHERAN CHURCH, FALLS CHURCH, VA

SERVICE OF WORD AND PRAYER



PRELUDE *On Jordan's Banks the Baptist's Cry* Setting: Jacob B. Weber

WELCOME

ENTRANCE HYMN #344 *On Joran's Banks the Baptist's Cry*

- 1 **On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
Announces that the Lord is nigh;
Awake and hearken, for he brings
Glad tidings of the King of kings!**

- 2 **Then cleansed be ev'ry life from sin;
Make straight the way for God within,
And let us all our hearts prepare
For Christ to come and enter there.**

- 3 **We hail Thee as our Savior, Lord,
Our refuge and our great reward;
Without Thy grace we waste away
Like flow'rs that wither and decay.**

- 4 **Lay on the sick Thy healing hand
And make the fallen strong to stand;
Show us the glory of Thy face
Till beauty springs in ev'ry place.**

- 5 **All praise, eternal Son, to Thee
Whose advent sets Thy people free,
Whom with the Father we adore
And Holy Spirit evermore.**

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

In the name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid:
**cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love
You, and worthily magnify Your Holy Name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, Jesus Christ, to save us from our sin, be our advocate in heaven and bring us to eternal life. Let us confess our sins in penitence and faith, resolved to keep God's commandments and to live in love and peace with all.

(Silence is kept)

Almighty God, our heavenly Father,

we confess that we have sinned against You and against our neighbor in thought, word and deed; through negligence, through weakness and through our own deliberate fault. We are truly sorry and repent of all our sins. For the sake of Your Son Jesus Christ, who died for us, forgive us all that is past and grant that we may serve You in newness of life, to the glory of Your Name. Amen.

Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy upon you, pardon and deliver you from all your sins, confirm and strengthen you in all goodness and keep you in eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

KYRIE

Kyrie, Kyrie eleison. Kyrie, Kyrie eleison.

For peace in our hearts as we gather for worship, and for the peace of the whole world and the unity of all, let us pray to the Lord

Kyrie, Kyrie eleison. Kyrie, Kyrie eleison.

For the proclamation of the Gospel in this and every place, and for the calling of all to faith, let us pray to the Lord.

Kyrie, Kyrie eleison. Kyrie, Kyrie eleison.

For grace to await our Lord's coming again in glory, and for the joyful anticipation of his coming into our hearts today, let us pray to the Lord

Kyrie, Kyrie eleison. Kyrie, Kyrie eleison.

HYMN OF PRAISE (omitted during this penitential season)

THE PRAYER OF THE DAY

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray. Stir up our hearts, O Lord,

to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.



FIRST LESSON Isaiah 40:1–11

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

and cry to her

that her warfare is ended,

that her iniquity is pardoned,

that she has received from the LORD's hand

double for all her sins.

A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

A voice says, “Cry!”
And I said, “What shall I cry?”
All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades
when the breath of the LORD blows on it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Behold your God!”
Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

PSALM 85

LORD, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you covered all their sin.
You withdrew all your wrath;
you turned from your hot anger.
Restore us again, O God of our salvation,
and put away your indignation toward us!
Will you be angry with us forever?

Will you prolong your anger to all generations?
Will you not revive us again,
that your people may rejoice in you?
Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,
and grant us your salvation.

Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints;
but let them not turn back to folly.
Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,
that glory may dwell in our land.

Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.
Faithfulness springs up from the ground,
and righteousness looks down from the sky.
Yes, the LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
Righteousness will go before him
and make his footsteps a way.

**Glory be to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning,
is now, and will be forever. Amen.**

SECOND LESSON 2 Peter 3:8–14

But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which 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.

Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

CHILDREN'S SERMON

**1 Come, Thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art,
Dear desire of ev'ry nation,
Joy of ev'ry longing heart.**

GOSPEL Mark 1:1-8

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark, the 1st chapter.

Glory to You, O Lord.

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way,
the voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to You, O Christ

SERMON

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ:

Today our Advent journey calls us to think about John – the one commonly known to us as John the Baptist. As we just heard in the Gospel reading, John's job was to prepare the way for Jesus.

Many people today have jobs where they prepare the way for another. If you work for the secret service, you prepare the way for the president's visit – making sure it is safe and secure. If you work as a publicist for an author or an artist, you prepare the way for their work to be seen or heard. If you work as an expert in a field, you prepare the way for our leaders by giving them briefings and sharing information. If you work as a teacher or a tutor, you prepare the way for students by giving them an education and getting them ready to take their tests.

John prepared the way for Jesus. He did this by preaching and baptizing in the wilderness. And we ought to pay close attention to this method and message of John, for we are called to prepare the Lord's way too – both for others and for ourselves.

Perhaps the first thing to notice about John's method and message is that he begins with something commonly accepted – the people's need to repent.

We're told that great crowds went out to see John for this purpose. The people of the country, the people of the city – they all went to confess their sins.

People know they are sinners. They know they have hurt others, hurt themselves and offended God. They know they have cheated, lied and stolen.

Yes, some people are very good at rationalizing their behaviors and can perhaps convince themselves that they are without sin – or at least without very much. But deep down, everyone knows they have done things that are not right.

John's call to repentance touched the hearts of the people. They knew it was right for them to repent. They longed for forgiveness. And they found it – in the waters of the Jordan.

A few seemed to come mostly for show – like the Pharisees, to whom John, according to another Gospel account, cried out "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham."

Most of the people, however, came honestly. From their need. They weren't following the Pharisees. The Pharisees were following them.

We know that the act of confessing one's sins – especially publicly – is very cleansing. We still do it today. And having a ritual like Baptism to reinforce one's confession is cleansing too. The fact that there were long lines to see John at the Jordan was no surprise.

And yet, John's combination of message and baptism was more than just your average religious exercise. It had uniquely great power – because of that to which it bore witness.

John may have started with something commonly accepted – people's sinfulness. But he quickly moved to something new, saying: "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."

John came as more than just a priest, to call people back to God and hear their confession. He came as a messenger. His message was about Jesus. The one to come after him. The one who would give the Spirit.

John distinguishes between his baptism and the baptism of Jesus. The baptism of Jesus will give the Holy Spirit – meaning it will announce forgiveness based on a clear and definite action of God, one to be seen, soon, in the ministry of Jesus. And it will equip the forgiven sinner with God's power, as given through the Spirit, through the Spirit's means.

John preached this message as one of the old-school prophets – dressed in their garb, holding forth in the wilderness. John's manner and appearance assured the people that this new thing God was doing was also grounded in God's actions of the past. God had always done new things. This one was even predicted by the prophets.

To further connect with the prophets, John quotes Isaiah on the need to "make his paths straight." This phrase has a dual meaning. On the one hand it means that we are to welcome him by making the way easy. We make it visible so that everyone sees it, and smooth so that there is no delay.

At the same time, it also means that we are to straighten up our lives. We are to adorn his path with right living and good works. We are to put away our sins so that we are not distracted and miss his arrival.

In our area there is construction, once again, on Interstate 66. Lanes will suddenly shift. Some will disappear altogether. Traffic slows. Danger rises. Perhaps this can be a reminder to us of how helpful it is to have straight paths.

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” John did this. And so should we. We, too, are called to be God’s messengers. Everyone who has received Christ’s gifts of forgiveness and peace is called to give witness to the Giver of these great gifts.

We can take our cues from John.

Start with that which is common to all – our sin. Speak about the troubles that come from sin. Point out how it drags everything and everybody down. Point out how it is the source of division between people. Point out how it is found in people’s actions, reactions and deep in their hearts.

We don’t necessarily need to point out people’s specific sins – although sometimes that is needed. But we do need to name sin as the ever-present scourge that it is. Don’t avoid talking about it. And don’t excuse it either. That’s what many people do. They hope sin will just go away. But it never does. In fact, when unchecked it just grows.

Then move to the solution that Christ offers. Christ offers forgiveness. He offers forgiveness between people, forgiveness between us and our Creator and forgiveness in the face of judgment. Show how this forgiveness promotes peace over fighting and reconciliation over avoidance. Show how it brings people together. Show how it brings healing.

And while speaking about these things, be authentic. Think about how John looked and lived. He took the posture of a prophet. He didn’t conform to the world. He wasn’t worried about fitting in. And he wasn’t afraid of the wilderness either.

We need to live this way. Both as individuals and as church. We need to avoid the temptation to be worldly and flashy. We need to get over the desire for earthly success and fame. We just need to be honest. And brave. And real.

We need to make our paths straight. And above all, we need to proclaim not ourselves but the one who is greater than all of us – Jesus Christ.

All that being said, as much as we need to preach the message to others, we need to preach it even more to ourselves. In fact, that’s where it always begins.

We need to tend to our hearts. We need to prepare them with prayer and repentance, listening to the Word of God and doing good works.

How’s that going for you? Have you repented of your sins or are you just excusing them? Are you making honest assessments of yourself, or avoiding them? Have you been doing your Advent devotions? Have you been speaking to God in prayer and listening to him in his Word?

Advent calls us to dig a little deeper. In discovery. About Jesus, yes. But also, ourselves.

What we discover about ourselves will never be pretty. But it can be revealing. And helpful... for discovering our need will turn us toward God. There’s nowhere else we can go.

And when we turn to the God who reveals himself through the prophets and through the Son to whom they point, we see a God of mercy and forgiveness. We see this in the Son's death on the cross, which paid the price for our sin. And we see this in his resurrection, which assured victory over death.

In today's sermon we've focused a lot on our preparations, taking our cue from John. But Isaiah spends more time speaking about the preparation God does and the joy which comes when Christ arrives.

Of that preparation, Isaiah says: "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain." God is working in the world.

And of the joy he says: "and the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

That joy of Christ's arrival is the main subject of the hymn we are about to sing. The hymn may begin by calling us to "prepare the royal highway," but it quickly goes on from there to describe the wonderful future Christ brings when he arrives. Note the references to Palm Sunday, and Psalm 24, and Isaiah 9 – beautiful texts about God's goodness and the glory of Christ's kingdom.

"Prepare the way of the Lord," yes! Prepare his way in our community and in our own lives. Prepare to celebrate too, for his glories are everlasting. And they bring the salvation we need.

In the name of Jesus our Savior. Amen

HYMN OF THE DAY #343 Prepare the Royal Highway

- 1 Prepare the royal highway;
The King of kings is near!
Let ev'ry hill and valley
A level road appear!
Then greet the King of Glory
Foretold in sacred story: *Refrain***

Refrain

**Hosanna to the Lord,
For He fulfills God's Word!**

- 2 God's people, see Him coming:
Your own eternal king!
Palm branches strew before Him!
Spread garments! Shout and sing!
God's promise will not fail you!
No more shall doubt assail you! *Refrain***
- 3 Then fling the gates wide open
To greet your promised king!
Your king, yet ev'ry nation
Its tribute too should bring.
All lands, bow down before Him!
All nations, now adore Him! *Refrain***
- 4 His is no earthly kingdom;
It comes from heav'n above.
His rule is peace and freedom
And justice, truth, and love.
So let your praise be sounding
For kindness so abounding: *Refrain***

APOSTLES' CREED

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

OFFERING *Prepare the Royal Highway* Setting: Robert Buckley Farlee

PRAYERS OF THE CHURCH

Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.

Brief silence

Restore us, O God; let Your face shine, that we may be saved! As You led Joseph like a flock, so now by Your Son lead us into straight paths. Bring us out of the bondage of our sins and plant us securely in Your eternal promises. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Almighty God, in Your blessed patience You send Your prophets and evangelists into the wilderness of this world so that sinners would not perish but rather reach repentance and find comfort in Your Word. Preserve the servants of Your Church and give to all congregations an increase of hope, that they may await the revealing of the new heavens and new earth in lives of holiness and godliness, diligent to be found without spot or blemish and at peace. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Holy Lord, preserve Your gifts of marriage and family among us, and protect them against the ravages of sin, the schemes of the devil and the raging of the world. And bless all of us in our coming together as a congregation, that we might be a source of love and family support to one another. Strengthen our caring and establish us on the foundation of Your Word. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of all comfort, Your Word alone endures forever, while the nations of the world come and go before You. Preserve us from placing our trust in princes and mortal men. And give us leaders who will rule after Your good pleasure, keeping order and protecting life, that we may live in godly quietness and peace. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord of hosts, graciously regard all for whom we pray [especially _____]. Extend your healing hand upon them and keep them in your care. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, You once prepared the way of Your only begotten Son through the preaching and baptism of John. Prepare now Your baptized Christians with true repentance. And give us a faith that seeks the forgiveness of sins and its accomplishment among us through your word and sacraments. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Into Your hands, Father, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

THE LORD'S PRAYER

**Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven;
give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom
and the power and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.**

BENEDICTION

The Lord bless us and keep us.
The Lord make His face shine on us
and be gracious to us.
The Lord look upon us with favor and ✠ give us peace.

SENDING HYMN #339 Lift Up Your Head, You Everlasting Doors

- 1 Lift up your heads, you everlasting doors,
And weep no more!
O Zion's daughter, sing,
To greet your coming King;
Now wave the victor's palm
And sing the ancient psalm:
"Lift up your heads, you everlasting gates!"
Your King awaits!**

- 2 Who is this King of great and glorious fame?
What is His name?
Lord God of Sabaoth,
Of whom the prophets wrote,
Whose chosen, humble steed
Declares Him king indeed!
Hosanna, Lord! Messiah, come and save
From sin and grave.**

- 3 Who may ascend Mount Zion's holy hill
To do God's will?
The One whose unstained hands
Can meet the Law's demands,
Whose purity within
Reveals One free from sin.
Come, praise this King who claims the cross as throne—
Praise Him alone!**
- 4 "Worthy is Christ!" The Lamb who once was slain
Now lives to reign.
He rules our earthly ways
As Lord of Ancient Days—
O join the endless song
Sung by the ransomed throng:
"Worthy is Christ!" The Lamb be praised again!
Amen! Amen!**

ANNOUNCEMENTS

DISMISSAL

Go in peace. Serve the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

POSTLUDE *Lift Up Your Heads, You Everlasting Doors* Setting: Allan Mahnke

Altar Flowers: 11/29 - "*Celebrating 35 years of blessed marriage.*" By Mark & Victoria B.
12/6 by Jennifer Z.

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