

Mark 1:1-8

Why are you here? Why did you come out to God's House this Sunday morning? That question was asked of the people who came out to the Jordan River. John was there, baptizing and preaching. He was rather odd—his appearance, his diet, his way of life. Perhaps that's why they were coming out to the Jordan—to see this unusual man. Is that why you're here? My appearance is odd, too. How often do you see your neighbor or co-worker dressed in a white robe, with a blue stole around their neck? If you're here because of me, then I hope it's because of my message. Because it's not my message, it's God's. It's the same message God told John to preach. Isaiah called John, "the voice," because it didn't matter how he looked. It didn't matter how odd he appeared. What mattered is what he said. And that's what matters today. Woe to me if I do not preach the same message John preached. For that word is what God wants His people to hear, in John's day, and today.

And what is that message? St. Mark writes, "And so John came...preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." That's why we're here. God draws you to His House to hear the message of "repentance for the forgiveness of sins." I think we can compare ourselves to people waiting in an airport. Why are they there? To have a cup of coffee at Starbuck's? To read the newspaper? To buy a souvenir? They may do these things while there, but that's not why they are there. They are there for one reason—they're waiting for their plane to arrive so they can fly to their destination.

We enjoy chatting with each other when we gather here on Sunday mornings. Perhaps we enjoy serving in God's House—ushering, greeting, putting up flowers and decorations. And today we enjoy the beautiful decorations all around us. But we, too, are here for one reason—to hear the message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

We are here to repent. We could say that we are here to throw ourselves into hell. Because that is what repentance means. We did that a few minutes ago. We cast ourselves into hell. We freely admitted to God that we deserve nothing but punishment both now and forever; that we deserve hell for our sins. In confessing our sins to God we cast ourselves into hell.

Now maybe you think that is a little extreme. Do I really deserve hell for my sins? There is no middle ground. It's either heaven or hell. And Scripture is clear that there isn't one of us who deserves heaven. "There is no one who does good and sins not, not even one," the Bible says. We are all "as an unclean thing." We are, each one of us, "the chief of sinners." Yep...hell it is, nothing less.

But friend, do not despair. We are here to cast ourselves into hell, but God is here to lift us out of hell and place us in heaven. John's message was one of "repentance for the forgiveness of sins." God forgives you. That's why He comes here to His House to meet you. Not to bring terror to your heart, but to cleanse your heart of sin. The reason why God brings you to repent is so He can forgive you. He would have you recognize the truth that only He can rescue you from the terrors of hell, and this He freely does for you by forgiving your sins for the sake of Jesus Christ.

John preached a “baptism” of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. By this you know that you are forgiven. In your baptism God is at work to save you. It is there in the waters that He pulled you out of the jaws of Satan and brought you to Himself in heaven. Baptism is Christ in action. Christ, who defeated the power of hell by His death and resurrection, gives you in your baptism what we do not deserve—heaven itself.

John said of Him, “I am not worthy to stoop down and untie His sandals.” Why not? Not because Jesus is the Almighty God, but because this Almighty God came down from heaven and covered Himself with flesh, that He might take our place in hell. He suffered, and He died, and He rose again, and that’s why John is in awe of Him. For He now is our salvation. Jesus lifts us out of hell and places us into heaven.

For me? Yes, for you. They were all coming out to John at the Jordan. All Jerusalem and the whole Judean countryside—the whole wretched lot of them. They came with all their burdens. Some came from broken homes. Others came from bitter marriages. Some were criminals. Others were sex-offenders. Many who came had cheated on their spouse. Many had lied to cover up their sins. All who came were guilty. They were hurting. Some had diseases. Many were old. Some were young. They all needed help. They all needed God’s forgiveness.

How did you come here today? You came with all your burdens, didn’t you? I know...I brought mine, too. That’s okay. We can’t change who we are and what we’ve done. But God does. He receives you as you are. He forgives you for who you are and what you’ve done. Are you here with a broken or wounded heart? Did you have a fight with your spouse?...a quarrel with your children? Are you hiding something from your loved ones? Something you’re ashamed of? It’s okay, because Jesus Christ is here to release you from your burdens. He carried your sins to His cross. He took your lies, and your shame, and He died there for it all. He takes your quarrels and brings peace to you and to your family. He does all this by lifting you out of hell and placing you into heaven. He forgives you. And because He forgives you, heaven is yours in Christ Jesus.

And that’s why you come here to God’s House. You wait and watch for Him whose advent sets us free from our guilt and shame. Sometimes people who wait in airports find that their flights are delayed. But Jesus never delays in coming to us. He gives you salvation now through His gracious Word of Life. As you come to His altar He is there for you in the bread and wine—to strengthen you where you are weak, to nourish your faith, to forgive you for every sinful thought, word, and deed. He gives you life for death, heaven for hell. He gives comfort to your troubled heart.

That was John’s message 2,000 years ago, and it’s still the message God wants you to hear and believe today...because it’s the truth. The truth of Jesus Christ, and His advent—His gracious coming, to people like you and me. Amen.