

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

I. Isaiah

A. It was a time of darkness and despair.

1. The people of Israel had been conquered and carried off in exile to Babylon.
2. Yet, in this time of despair, a PROPHET arose – preaching words of comfort to God's people.
3. In the declining power of Babylon and the rise of Cyrus of Persia, the PROPHET could see the coming restoration of Israel.

B. Using the image of a **royal procession**, the PROPHET tells what this return will look like.

1. A new way is made through the desert, as the mighty Lord comes bringing peace and pardon to Jerusalem.
2. *“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.*
3. *“Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*
4. In other words, God will take away all barriers and there will be NO impediments.

C. The PROPHET then goes on to tell what life will be like in this new time.

1. Though all human powers fail, God will reign and the Lord's word will stand firm.

2. Like a SHEPHERD God will care for God's people.

3. *"Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'*

- *"See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him;*

- *"his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.*

4. *"He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep."*

5. God **WILL** comfort God's people. [PAUSE]

II. John the Baptist

A. It was a time of darkness and despair.

1. The people of Israel had once again been conquered and were living under the domination of an occupying force.

2. The voice of the Lord was silent.

3. There had been no **prophecy** for 300 years!

4. Yet, in this time of despair a PROPHET arose proclaiming a **baptism** of repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

B. Mark wants to make it very clear that we know just who John the Baptist is.

1. So he borrows a line from **Malachi** (3:1), *"See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me ..."*

- and adds it to the Isaiah passage that was our OT lesson.

2. So we end up with: *“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”*

3. Mark portrays **John the Baptist** in the tradition of **Elijah** – the Greatest of the Prophets – and the forerunner of the Messiah;
- based on the prophecy of **Malachi** (4:5-6)
- *“Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.”*

4. And just to make sure we didn’t miss the comparison, MARK tells of John the Baptist’s wardrobe:
- *“Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.”*

5. Once again MARK is trying to link **John the Baptist** to **Elijah**.

6. For in **II Kings** (1:8), we read of messengers returning to the King who asks them *“What sort of man was he who told you these things?”*
- And they answered, *“He wore a garment of haircloth, with a leather belt around his waist.”*
- To which the King replies, *“It is Elijah the Tishbite!”*

7. Who could miss all these comparisons?

8. For Mark, **John the Baptist** is the prophesied forerunner of the Christ.

C. As reported by Mark, John’s preaching consists of two parts:

1. First, the preaching of repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

2. And, second, the announcement of the coming One who is mightier than he, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

3. John warned the people not to rely on their physical descent from Abraham to ensure a relationship with God – they must make this relationship their own.

4. And to enter into that relationship anew, John offers BAPTISM – not as a ritual of cleansing but as a sign of REPENTANCE.

5. Repentance – to turn your life around – to live a NEW life – a life in relationship with God.

D. John also preaches that there is one to come who is mightier than he is.

1. He points beyond beyond himself to the One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

2. And this is the key for Mark's understanding of the role of John the Baptist.

3. John is the FORERUNNER – the one sent to prepare the way for the Coming One.

4. Like the Prophets of Old, John is sent to call God's people to purify their lives and to turn their hearts and souls to the Lord. [PAUSE]

III. US

A. It IS a time of darkness and despair.

1. WE live in a time when we don't have all the answers.

2. A PANDEMIC rages - there is poverty, hunger, homelessness, racism, and war.

3. What a road we have been on, since we set out on our Advent journey last year.

4. COVID and lockdowns; quarantines and not being able to worship together.

5. Many have fallen sick – some have sadly died – and all our lives have been changed in ways that we could not have imagined.

6. How do we find God in this?

- How do we see what a kind and loving God could possibly be doing?

7. Yet, if we don't, it seems all will be lost.

8. And here we are, still praying, still asking God for the help we need.

B. And, into this time of despair PROPHETS arise to preach words of comfort – to tell that God comes to our world as a baby.

1. And those PROPHETS – are US.

2. WE, like John the Baptist, like Isaiah, are sent to tell the Good News of God in Jesus Christ.

- We too are called to **“Prepare the Way of the Lord.”**

3. We too are called to be prophets and share God's promise.

4. Our role as Christians – as Prophets – is much like that of John the Baptist – **to prepare our world for the experience of Christ's presence**

5. But it is not an easy role to fill.

6. For all who choose to adopt this role have to be aware that, at some level, that it involves **vulnerability** – it means exposing oneself to the potential **criticism** and **negative judgment** of others.

7. WE are called to put ourselves out there – WE are called to be PROPHETS and prepare the Way of the Lord.

8. And there are many ways for us to do this – as each of us is called to proclaim the coming **reign of God** in our own way.

C. So just how do we do this?

1. First and foremost by being ourselves.

2. We bring the **presence of God** with us wherever we go.

3. So it may very well be that your role as a PROPHET is lived out by the way you live your life – in everything YOU say or do.

4. It's not always easy, especially in this time of COVID, but in whatever way we have limited contact with others we can live into this role in the way we help other people, or the things we say or do.

5. That's what it means to be a PROPHET of God in this day and age, and to bring the Good News of God's **comfort** to the people we know and love, just as John and Isaiah did so long ago.

Conclusion

The PROPHET sings that “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.”

What does this mean in your life?

- How can we share it with others?

For at this time there IS sadness and acute anxiety, but also JOY; and our task is to remember that **God is in charge**.

That's what it means to be a PROPHET in this day and time; to bring COMFORT – the Good News of God's love and peace – placed in a little baby in a manger in Bethlehem.

God IS coming. God IS in charge.

Let us work to “**Prepare the Way of the Lord**” now as we look to welcome him anew this Christmas.

Let Us Pray

Merciful God, who sent you messengers the Prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. AMEN