

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Mark 1:1-8

<sup>1</sup> *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

<sup>2</sup> *As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;*

<sup>3</sup> *the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight,’*

<sup>4</sup> *John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

Several years ago, Don and I ventured out to find the Arundel Mills Mall. We had no problem finding it. After several hours of wandering from store to store, we began to feel hungry and decided it was time to leave and find a place to eat. We decided upon a place to eat not far from the mall, and since we were not familiar with the area, we plugged the address into my phone’s GPS and began following the voice’s instructions.

Unfortunately, when the voice told us we had reached our destination, we were not anywhere near the restaurant. In fact, we found ourselves in front of a house in the middle of a quiet neighborhood. We decided that we must have made a wrong turn somewhere. So, we went back to the mall, checked to make sure we gave the GPS the correct address and made another try at finding the restaurant. Again, we found ourselves in front of the same house in the same neighborhood; and once again we returned to the mall and made another go at it, and again we ended with the same result.

By now we were getting hungry and frustrated. The only thing we had accomplished in our search for the restaurant we had chosen was to go in circles. Finally, we decided to stop the ridiculous search leading us in circles and find somewhere else to eat. The goal after all, was to find something to eat, and to do that, we did not need that one particular restaurant.

The Gospel of Mark begins with an announcement that God was at work. God had a goal he was trying to achieve in bringing his people back to him. It was not a new goal. God tried several times over to warn his people through the prophets that they needed to turn from their wicked ways and return to God. Only then would they find the inner peace and joy they sought.

But for the most part the prophets’ warnings fell on deaf ears because the people relied on the wrong GPS guides. They were driven by their human desires rather than Godly directions. Selfishness and pride led them in circles of seeking outward pleasures to satisfy their inner emptiness. God’s goal was to redirect his people by breaking through their ignorance and obsession in following a repetitive path leading them to nowhere.

So, after 300 years of silence through prophets, God put another plan into action. The setting was perfect. The Jews were living under the rule of the Romans. The people were quite miserable; but their souls were also desperate and hungry for a word from God. This time,

however, God sent a prophet, John, to make the announcement that God was coming to live among them to save them. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

God's plan would serve to offer an end to the inner misery of people for all time—yesterday, today, and tomorrow—by restoring them to his side. God's goal—to be known, to love on all people, to give hope to the lost and oppressed, to bring freedom and relief through the forgiveness of sin— would be set-in motion and accomplished in a new way through his only Son, Emmanuel.

The prophet John, sent by God, makes the announcement to us as he did to the Jews in his day, using the powerful and forthright words of the prophet Isaiah—"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." His announcement comes with a call for baptism for the forgiveness of sin.

John's call on the Jews to be baptized was something rather radical. Baptism was used only for the Gentile men who wanted to convert to the Jewish faith. In fact, converts needed to undergo three things: first, circumcision because that was the mark of being a part of a covenant people; second, a sacrifice had to be made for him because he stood in the need for atonement and only blood could atone for sin; and third, he had to undergo baptism, which symbolized his cleansing from all the pollution from his past. With the assumption that his sin was great, the baptism was full-body immersion, symbolizing the washing away of everything.

So, John's call to baptism was not something new to the Jews, but it was new in the sense that he was calling them, and not only the Gentiles, to be baptized. He was telling them that it was not enough to be born Jewish in order to be one of God's chosen people; it was not enough to follow the practices of a Jew, but like the Gentiles, who needed their sins and old sinful way of living washed away, they needed baptism, too.

Baptism is always accompanied by confession. Any movement to right one's self with God requires confession. This is how one makes the path straight for the way of the Lord. In other words, this is how one stops going in circles: make a turn in a new direction that will make the way clear for him to take us into his plan for a better life—an eternal life beginning now, a life that this world cannot offer, but only he can give us. This confession needs to be made in three different ways.

The first confession that one needs to make is confession to one's self. It is a part of human nature to close our eyes to that which we do not want to see, especially our own sins. But this is necessary. Take for instance the alcoholic and the drug addict—before they can really get and receive the help they need, they must admit they have a problem. It does little good for others who see the person with a problem, to tell that person they need to get help if that person will not admit he or she has a problem. He or she will simply continue feeding the addiction, perhaps even until it becomes too late and takes his or her life.

The reality is that no one in all the world is harder to face than ourselves; and the first step to repentance and to a right relationship to God is to admit our sin to ourselves.

The second confession one needs to make is to those whom he or she has wounded. It will not do us much good to tell God we are sorry for what we have done to others until we tell others we are sorry for our words and/or actions that were offensive and hurtful. It is up to the individual we hurt to decide whether they will forgive us, but we need to make the genuine effort to confess. Unless we are willing to do this, there is no clear way for God to enter in our hearts because we've created a physical boundary of pain and brokenness. It can often be the case that it is much easier to confess to God our sin against another, than it is to confess our sin face-to-

face to those we've sinned against, but that's what needs to happen to prepare the way for the Lord to come into our own lives.

And finally, it is necessary for a person to make confession to God. Ridding selfishness and pride from our lives begins when we request God's forgiveness. It's only when we can admit to God that we messed up and need his forgiveness that we actually give him the opportunity to say to us that we are forgiven and to be forgiven. It's only then that we are given the chance for freedom from sin and the devastating ramifications that sin places on our lives.

"A few years ago, rumors spread that a certain Catholic woman was having visions of Jesus. The archbishop decided to check her out.

"Is it true, ma'am, that you have visions of Jesus?" asked the cleric.

"Yes," the woman replied.

"Well, the next time you have a vision, I want you to ask Jesus to tell you the sins that I confessed in my last confession. Please call me if anything happens."

"Ten days later the woman notified her spiritual leader of a recent apparition.

"Within the hour the archbishop arrived. 'What did Jesus say?' he asked.

"She took his hand and gazed deep into his eyes. 'Bishop,' she said, 'these are his exact words: 'I CAN'T REMEMBER.'"

God forgives and forgets. With freedom from our sin, we can participate with other Christians in helping to make our world a better place in which to live. Because it is then that we also, like the prophet John the Baptist, live authentic Christian lives, led by the Holy Spirit, announcing to the world, and showing the world that there is a better way, a better path that we can all travel together, removing us from the endless circles of emptiness and hopeless living, and into the bottomless and mysterious depths of God's amazing love for us.

It's never too late to jump off the hamster wheel of life (there's another image for you). This is what we all want as we follow the star this Advent season. Confession is the star that leads us on a straight path to the Light of Christ and the kind of life we all seek with God, today and forevermore. Amen.