

Last week Pastor Ehlke preached from Mark 1:1-8. That was also a reading on John the Baptist. A lot of the phrases from that text are in our text today. I was thinking of changing readings, just so that we wouldn't cover the same material, but I decided to stick with this text so I could dig in a little deeper on one phrase – "Make straight the way for the Lord." That was a prophecy from the Old Testament book of Isaiah, chapter 40. John the Baptist is the one who was to make straight a way for the Lord.

A few thousand years ago, when a king came to town, major road work had to be done. There was no interstate system. Instead, workers went ahead of the king and filled in the pot holes to make a smooth path to his destination. Low points were filled in. High points were leveled. Crooked paths were straightened. That was John the Baptist's job, to prepare the people for the coming of the true king, Christ. The way that was going to happen was through repentance. So today I want to spend some time talking about what repentance is. That's what John the Baptist did to prepare the people for Christ's first coming. That's what we do today to prepare ourselves and others for Christ's second coming. Advent is a time of repentance. Advent is a time where we make straight the way for the Lord in our own hearts and in the hearts of others. But what does that even mean?

1st Part of Repentance - Repentance starts with recognizing the sin in our own life. You cannot appreciate the gospel unless you first have sorrow over sin. There is a difference in knowing what sin is and actually feeling sorrow over your sin. Paul speaks extensively on this idea in 2 Corinthians 7. "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." (vs. 10) So he makes a difference between Godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. And the difference between the two is simply this. Two guys are sitting in prison for the same thing. They both stole cars. They both feel sorrow over what they did, but it's different. The one is sorry he got caught. He is sad that he can't see his family anymore. He is sad because he knows this is going to affect the rest of his life. His sorrow is focused on the consequences of his sin. But the other guy is sorry because he knows he let down his God. He knows the commandments and he knows that his Lord saw the whole thing.

This is a problem that we all deal with. You see, it's easy to teach someone the difference between right and wrong and what sin is. But it's not as easy to teach a person to truly feel Godly sorrow over what they did. Our biggest temptation when it comes to repentance starts right away in step 1. We minimize sin. We have a way of blowing it off as if it's no big deal. We have a way of minimizing sin by comparing our sins to others and we convince ourselves that it's not that big of a deal.. It's just hatred, not murder. It's just coveting, not stealing. It's just gossip, not physical harm. It's just lust, not adultery. Sure, it's adultery, but it's a loving relationship. If we don't see a problem, we aren't interested in a solution. We are constantly trying to convince ourselves that we aren't that bad, that other people are doing it, and that God doesn't really care about my sins.

In the same way, if someone comes to you and calls you out for your sin. They are not your enemy. They just became your best friend, because no one else in your life cared about you and your soul enough to do something about the sin that is destroying your faith. I've heard people say that Christians are judgmental. But John the Baptist called those Pharisees out for their sins because they couldn't see them. The only way to make straight the way for the Lord in your heart is to bulldoze down those mountains of pride, or to fill in those valleys of sin and guilt. But before they can be bulldozed, you have to see them. And if you can't see them on your own, then pray that God sends someone else in your life to help you see them.

2nd Part of Repentance - Recognizing sin gets us ready for the next part of repentance, so that a straight way can be made to your heart. That's pointing us to Christ, the answer to our sins. John the Baptist didn't just call people out for their sins, he pointed to Christ very literally – "Look the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." He called him the light in the darkness. He said he was unworthy to tie his sandals. That's the next step of repentance. Not only recognizing sin, but seeing that Christ took away that sin.

It seems that for people who have been Christians for the good part of their lives, this is the part we want to skip over so quickly. We say, "Yeah, yeah, I know that Jesus died for my sins, but how do I fix my marriage? How do I overcome this addiction? How do I deal with depression and stress?" If a person doesn't have a pulse, you don't operate on their wrist. The problem isn't in the wrist. It's in the heart. The real solution for a life of repentance, the real way that a way is made straight for the Lord, isn't focused on what you have to do to change your life. It's rather all focused on what Christ has done for you. That's the heart. When the heart is fixed, there will be a pulse. That is when you recognize the seriousness of your sins, and appreciate what Christ has done for you, I guarantee it will have an affect on the rest of your life.

We have these exercises, if I can call them that, in our church where we confess our sins. We think again about our own personal sins, we contemplate being born as enemies of God, the eternal hell that we deserve because of our sins, so that we can reappraise what our Savior has done for us. If kings had people running in front of them filling in pot holes and making the road smooth all the way to their destination, the destination of our King is our heart. Just as a small insignificant town would be honored and feel unworthy to have a king show up in their insignificant town, Christ has come into our heart. He doesn't come with an iron fist and tell you what you have to do to be forgiven. He says it's already done for you. John the Baptist pointed people to Christ and said, "Look the Lamb of God." This is the sacrificial lamb that will be slaughtered for you to make atonement for your sins. Nothing else needs to be done. They would have all known that this was a reference to the Passover lamb, that was innocently slaughtered to save them. John the Baptist pointed to Christ and said, this is the light of the world. He is the only way out of the darkness. And John the Baptist pointed to Christ and said, this is the king who is going to reign in your heart so that I can boldly say to you that your sins are forgiven. I can say that with confidence even without knowing what sins you are personally struggling with, because Christ is in your heart.

The 3rd part of repentance is turning your life around. It's this idea of making a U-turn, away from sin and towards a Christian life. The way struggle with this step of repentance is we look at like as what I have to do to change my life. It makes the Christian life a burden and source of stress rather than a joyful reaction to what Christ has done. I'm going to share this video with you, which I think is a great illustration of repentance. This is a story of two sisters who were born blind. There is a group that goes to different parts of the world where they don't have the medical means possible to fix things like sight and they give to blind people sight. (SHOW THE VIDEO) Imagine being able to see for the first time. They will always appreciate the light, because they remember and will always remember the darkness. And since she remembers well the darkness and sees the light, I guarantee you her life is going to change. It's not forced. It's natural. It's not a burden. It's a joy. She's going to be able to play games with other kids in ways that she never was able to before. She'll be able to go to school and read books without braille. She'll be able to start thinking in a whole new way about what she will be some day when she grows up. Her life is going to be noticeably different because she remembers the darkness and she sees the light. That is a great example of repentance. The problem was recognized and obvious. The solution was miraculous. The change in their life will happen naturally.

In the same way for us too, the last step of repentance, that is, turning your life around towards Christ. Is never forced. It's natural. It shouldn't be a source of stress, or a burden, just a joyful reaction to what Christ made us. When we recognize our sin, and appreciate our Savior, the rest of our life naturally conforms. So, repentance is not what you do to get the forgiveness of sins. It's what you do because you know that you have the forgiveness of sins. Repentance is not the cause of your salvation, it's the result of knowing that you are saved. Because when you fix the heart, there will always be a pulse.

Now some of you are thinking, "Uh oh, if I'm a Christian who understands sin and appreciates my Savior, then why do I still struggle?" Because that's what Christians do. We are constantly striving to recognize sin, and run from sin. That's what Christians do. A person who is doing that needs to know that they are already forgiven. I worry more about the person who is not struggling, who is embracing sin. When we see that, that is the reminder to us that we are the John the Baptist of the 2nd coming of Christ. We are the ones who were sent to preach repentance. We want to make sure the people understand the seriousness of sin, so that a way is made straight and ready in their heart for Christ to forgive them.

This is when things get uncomfortable. Because it's one thing when I have to deal with my own struggles, my own heart, but it's another thing when I have to talk to someone else about their sins. But this was John the Baptist's job, of making straight a way for the Lord. And now it's our job. Christ is coming soon. You have friends and family members who don't know Christ. They are spiritually blind and you have the solution to give them sight. You are the one with the keys to the bulldozer to knock down those mountains of pride and fill in those valleys of guilt to make the way for Christ to be king in their heart. John the Baptist isn't here, but you are, with a finger to point to the Lamb of God who takes away not only your sins, but the sins of your family members and friends.

We risk being called judgmental. We risk our relationships with them. But you know what they gain in Christ. There are more people in this church than you may think who came to faith later on in life, only because a friend reached out to them to talk to them about sin and about their Savior. There are also a number of people in this church who grew up in this church or another church, but fell away, and came back to the church and to the Lord. Those success stories aren't centered around some pastor doing all the work. They are centered around people like you, being a John the Baptist before the second coming of Christ. You sense the urgency of the situation. And you love them enough to say something. The thing that is going to motivate you to do that, is not guilt. It's rather your own memory of being spiritually blind and lost, but coming to sight through faith. It's your own appreciation for your Savior and King, who visited your heart, as unworthy as you are, and made his home there. So friends, let's live a life of repentance. See your sins. See your Savior. And let's help others to do the same. Amen.