

Prepare the Way for the Lord

✧ **Baptized and confessing** (vv.1-5)

✧ **Worthy in Christ alone** (vv.6-8)

In the name of Jesus the Christ, the “Chosen Savior” and Son of God, dearly redeemed believers:

A most interesting educational movie is *Longitude*. It traces the 40-year struggle of a simple English carpenter to solve a problem which now seems so simple. But in the early 1700’s the British Navy was sailing all over the world lost at sea. A ship could be just over the horizon from an island with fresh fruit while its sailors were dying from scurvy. All because they could not measure longitude, without a clock that could work at sea. John Harrison invented the clock and four decades later collected the reward. Amazing, isn’t it? Long before watches and cell phones, time and place meant life and death.

2,000 years ago another man named “John” had life and death information about a different time and place. Simple truth was lost in the fog of ignorance and unbelief. But the reward from listening to John still surpasses any earthly treasure. Souls sailing blind can be just inches away from life and yet be dying like flies. John Harrison and John the Baptizer were both known for their tenacity. Beyond obsession, John the Baptizer had a mission, an assignment from God: **Prepare the Way for the Lord.**

✧ **Baptized and confessing** (vv.1-5)

It must have been something really important that “*all Judea and all the people of Jerusalem kept coming out to him.*” (NETNT) It was about a 20-mile walk down steep, rocky roads to the Jordan River almost 3500 feet below. What kept calling them? You can only understand if you realize it had been 400 years of silence since the prophets of God before this voice in the wilderness crying.

This is the way the second Gospel of the New Testament is inspired by the Holy Spirit: “*The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*” Mark wrote from Rome when Christians were considered weak and superstitious, even harmful to the state. So the Holy Spirit inspired Mark to tell the story of the powerful Jesus whose life rippled with mighty deeds, though He gave His life into shame and death on a Roman cross. Mark’s rambling, breathless news of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection caught the mind and heart of the Roman world and gives us food for thought in this Advent of our Lord.

Two prophets Mark quotes together. First, from Malach (3:1) who can only be understood as “*it is written in Isaiah the prophet.*” The LORD said through Malachi: “*I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way.*” And all this makes sense in the light of Isaiah 40:1: “*A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the LORD, make straight paths for him.’*”

It took tons of work to make a highway for ancient kings. Still today, proud mountains need leveling for a smooth pavement to be laid down. Deep valleys need to be spanned. Few Americas realize the mud slides, rock slides, storms and fires that pummel US Highway 101 along the Pacific Coast of California, Oregon and Washington, especially this time of year. But the deep valleys get washed out like your heart when tragedy strikes. This week a man at Proposal Rock, Oregon, watched his bride-to-be washed out to sea. No power of man can keep the tides from rising and sneaker waves away. People ignore Coast Guard warnings and God’s law. Only God can make a highway to your heart.

And God’s bulldozer really hurts. “*John the Baptizer lived in the wilderness and preached the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*” Essentially the same Christian Baptism today, it’s a miracle of God’s Word that begins to level proud hearts. Repentance stops the pointing finger and admits, “This is my sin. I am wrong.” Only God’s Word can fill in the depression of sorrow behind the honest truth. Christ brings full and free forgiveness to bridge His cross over every foul swamp and slough of despair from your sin and mine. Change your mind about sin, self and Savior. Repent! Believe!

Where are you on that road to the Jordan River? Are you still tripping over rocks on the way down? Are you struggling to leave behind all the excitement of the city to go out and find something with lasting value ignored by the masses? Or have you already been there and now are on the steep, rocky, sweaty climb back to real life of problems and difficulties? Has it been so long since your Baptism that you don't think about it anymore? Are you losing some of its blessings like water drying in the hot Judean sun? Advent is the time. This is the place. And John the Baptist is the prophet to call us back to Christ. **Prepare the Way for the Lord.** Wherever you've been, you're only...

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You could see it just by looking at him and smell it the closer you got. *“John was dressed in camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.”* This was a stark life with a harsh message that would cut to the heart. But this cutting can only heal as the Great Physician like a skillful surgeon takes care of your body and soul as He cared for John the Baptizer.

He preached: “The One mightier than I is coming after me.” That meant a lot to the Jewish crowds because they knew they were looking at a mighty prophet who reminded them of their Old Testament Elijah by what he wore, what he ate and how he preached. For 400 years since Malachi, no mighty prophet had arisen in Israel. Now mighty John was here. But *One mightier* was *coming*.

How could John say he was less than a slave to Him? And what did he mean about the *One* who was *coming*? *“I am not worthy to bend down and untie His sandal straps.”* Do you feel that way about the *One*? Or do you question His will for your life as if you know better and could do better if He would just listen to you? We think we're so intellectual for questioning God's sense of right. That Buddhist monk in China we heard about a few weeks ago has lots of fellow cynics in America who don't want to worship any God who sends people to hell. But then none of us like tornados coming through our neighborhood either; does that stop them? If you deny the existence of God, will that stop His justice from coming down on you? Or do you really want Him to let you go your own way in open rebellion?

God wants us to see Him as He really is. That's why He sent His Son, the *One*. Not only does He sets the rules and penalties for breaking them, He also punished those penalties on Himself with love and kindness beyond anyone on earth or in heaven. Christ used His power to heal the sick and raise the dead. But when it came time to protect Himself from cruel humans, Jesus chose to suffer death in our place. It was that important for Him to satisfy God's justice with His innocent life that we guilty criminals would not have to suffer eternally under God's wrath in hell. Only His holiness can make us worthy to shine His shoes, shovel His sidewalks or clean His church. But His love makes us eager to support His mission, teach His Sunday School, sing in His Choir and spread His message of life, peace and joy for all. Bow down at His feet with John the Baptizer and **Prepare the Way for the Lord – Worthy in Christ alone.**

“I have baptized you with water,” John told his hearers, *“but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”* The Lord's Apostle Paul warns us not to interpret this like Pentecostals as “a water baptism” versus a “Spirit baptism,” because according to Paul there is *“one baptism”* (Ephesians 4:5). Forty days after our crucified Lord Jesus rose from the dead He explained to His disciples: *“John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”* (Acts 1:5 NIV) Ten days later on Pentecost they experienced the miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit that flooded them with spiritual gifts for spreading the *Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God* to the ends of the earth.

And the dear Holy Spirit is still pouring out those gifts on God's people today. A recovering alcoholic in Bible Information Class was fearful until I used God's law to assure him that God would be watching over him and keep him straight. Children need firm love from their parents to say, “I'm not going to let you do that. I love you too much.” As a baby needs the blanket wrapped tight, we need God's love to hold us close and never let us go. We too are **Worthy in Christ alone.** Not harsh diet or clothing, not dedicated service can make us **Worthy**, only the kindness and love of God in Christ. The clock is ticking. **Prepare the Way for the Lord.** Amen.