

Deacon Jeff Schlueter
Prepare the Way of the Lord
Sunday before the Theophany
Gospel: Mark 1:1-8

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord. Make His paths straight.”

This Sunday, we are two days away from the Great Feast of Theophany when we will stand with our Lord Jesus Christ as He is baptized by John, as the Holy Spirit descends on Him as a dove, and the voice of the Father declares, “He is My Beloved Son. Listen to Him,” as the fullness of the Trinity will be clearly before us. This Gospel today is the prelude to Jesus’ baptism and more importantly His baptism is an even greater prelude to the greatest baptism He would undergo for us human beings and our salvation; the baptism of His blood on the cross. With the message of John in mind I want to tell you about a young man I know quite well at my workplace.

This 20 something man was baptized into Christ Jesus two years ago now. He and I have started a religious dialogue of sorts. He knows I’m a Christian and now a Deacon and he feels comfortable speaking to me about his faith. A few weeks ago he said, “I want to show you something that is very special to me.” He showed me his upper arm and on it was a tattoo of Jesus with a cross and a crown of thorns. “You may think this is wrong, but I thank God because it is a reminder. It makes me face HIM everyday, and think about where my life was, where it is now and what I should be trying with His help to be.” This young man had been a heavy duty drug and alcohol addict. He was invited one Sunday to Church after having dropped out of organized church years ago. The Pastor that day preached about John the Forerunner’s message about “straight paths.” “I thought during that sermon, that I needed to straighten myself up and get on the right road. I was on the road to physical death and sure hell and I knew it and there wasn’t a thing I could do to get out this spiral on my own. I needed this Jesus whom the pastor spoke of. And now I need Him daily to remind me what the straight and narrow road is all about.”

The Gospel says today, John the Forerunner preached a hard message to a very receptive audience. Vs. 5 ...all the land of Judea and those from Jerusalem came out to hear him...confessing their sins....” There were a lot of people just like that young man at work and John was calling them to make straight the path because a Man was coming who would change their lives forever.

Tuesday of this week, January 6, we will celebrate that Life changing Feast-Theophany-lit. appearance of God. ” But what is so life altering about Jesus going into the water for us, for those people listening to John, for that young man at work? He showed unequivocally that all the prophecies of the Savior from the Old Testament were fulfilled in Him as the Spirit descended, and the Father’s voice said, “My beloved.” Truly the prophecy “Emmanuel, God with us,” is a certain fact. Surely Jn. 1:14, “The Word was made flesh...” is not just hopeful thinking, but sure hope. Our Triune God is now here on earth, a Savior has come in order to go down in that water with all the sinners around Him so as to do what Hebrews 2:14 says, “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Jesus Himself likewise shared in the same that through death he might destroy him who had the power of death, the devil.” .

I find it great that Theophany is right after New Year’s. Think about this. There is that old tradition to make silly New Year’s resolutions that we never keep. In John’s message and by Jesus’ baptism is the ultimate resolution that Jesus kept for us so that we can keep in faith. The Icon of Christ for Theophany showing Jesus in the waters of the Jordan is about us. Jesus became us, we by baptism have become Him and by Baptism we are a new people called to a new radical way of thinking, acting, and living. We are like the people of Israel who experienced a Theophany as they were rescued from Pharaoh’s Egyptian slavery, led by the staff of Moses, shielded by the Father in the cloud and fire, led through a baptismal water of the parted Red Sea and set a on straight path of obedience, trust, faithfulness that would lead to the Promised land, the new Kingdom overflowing with milk and honey.

But the problem was that the road the Israelites took turned into dead ends, hairpin twisted routes and 40 years of anguish and pain. This morning before we appreciate the Gift that the Baptized One brings, first we need to talk with brutal honesty, about the New Israel, and the fact the Church needs to go back to the Jordan and hear John out this morning. We have to open our ears to hear this morning because an historical time of God’s visitation is upon us today!! .

That young man at work and I had a chat a week or two ago. He was lamenting how he wanted to be a better Christian. He was trying. He was learning his weaknesses and leaning on Christ in repentance and that attitude is good. But he asked me something. "Jeff, do you think that God punishes us for our sins?" And he brought up the whole socio economic mess that has descended upon us like a tornado. Is this all punishment, he wanted to know? I told him, "I don't believe that our Lord and God punishes. God loves. St. Paul says, "When we are faithless, He is always faithful." But though God loves, He disciplines like a loving parent. Hebrews 12:5 "You have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as sons: My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him For whom the Lord loves He chastens and scourges every son whom He receives."

Now let's bring it home. You have lost a job. You have mental anguish and stress over your economic situation. You may have a great job and yet there are health issues, home issues. Every one of us has issues.Is God punishing us in any of this? Why God, are you letting all this happen if you love me? The Gospel of Luke 13 says Jesus was asked a question about some fellow Galileans whom Pilate had murdered and mixed their blood with that of sacrifices in the temple and of some people who had been killed when a big stone tower fell on them; Was God punishing them as worse sinners? No, Jesus said, but that the disasters of life are a wake up call to all to straighten out the path, to get on the right road, that of repentance. John the Forerunner, was preaching that wake up call.

His message is also the strong medicine that we need to survive. "Too often we are on the wrong road!" That is what the word sin means, missing the mark. Getting off track! And Repent means in the original literally "turn around. Get back on the straight road!" It is interesting that the Gospel writer Mark begins John's preaching context with a quote from Isaiah and why is it interesting? Because John's audience knew the book of Isaiah. Isaiah's society and church, were much like John's - like our contemporary situation. It had gone off track. If you look in Isaiah, it's like staring into a mirror. We see greed, just like on Wall Street. We see dishonest rulers and politicians looking out for their own wealth and cheating the poor to line their own pockets. We see injustice for those who could least afford it. You see hurting, broken families, abuse and sexual perversion. Listen to the one John quoted, Isaiah 1:15-20... Isaiah 5:7...Isaiah 58:1-11...The poor but righteous they ground into the dirt, the dishonest they rewarded. The materialism which should have been used to feed the poor, and given back in faithful offering to the Lord they heaped up in dirty schemes to make more for themselves. The sexual gifts God gave for marriage they desecrated and dragged into filthy pleasures for themselves. And God said, "I have had enough." This is supposed to be my baptized people. This is the nation I cherished and took out of Egypt to be a shining light to the Gentiles and they are filthy prostitutes. And as Isaiah foretells God withdrew from them. He took the Promised Land away. They wept in the words of the Psalm we use during Great lent, Psalm 137...by the waters of Babylon.

John the Forerunner's message is alive and aimed at us this morning in this Church not to create guilt, but to give us a chance to repent and "make straight the paths" and prepare to meet our Christ Jesus. Do we believe it? Do we believe it? Do we believe that is the Living Word of Life? Then listen sons and daughters, baptized into your Lord Jesus Christ. Wake up and turn away from business as usual. Wake up and see in midst of all our economic woes, in our political scandals, in our sociological cracks and strains of life is the only real message of hope. Jesus has the stimulus package we need! If you have lost a job, if you are afraid of losing your job, if your marriage is stressed not only because of socio economic pressures, but because "me" is God in the household, if your children cause you heartache, if you children are scared, if you are in a cycle of abuse, If you are addicted to this material swirl of money, secular self worship, sex, and self gratification...then listen to call of the Forerunner, the call of the Savior, turn and again find the healing that is here today. How many times have we let our religion, our Orthodox religion become a formality, an ethnic custom instead of the Healing gift Jesus gave? "I'm Orthodox. I'm okay." How often have we just gone through motions of religion a couple, or few times a year? And we say, "This Orthodoxy doesn't inspire me;. The Liturgy is boring. ...How many times have people come to do a duty, or maybe they bring their children and think that a little exposure to Sunday school stories and church for a few years will give them some sort of religious inoculation when we feel up to it, but there is no Repentance!! And no repentance, no healing. How many times have we allowed negative talk, backbiting, gossip to enter our mouths and lives even after having partaken of the very Christ who called us out of this garbage? How many times have we allowed others to out and take care of the poor and needy. Our Savior weeps and waits for our return. He wants us to listen and act on John's message to "Make straight paths for Him to come and enter and fill our hearts with the Holy Spirit so that we can be a power house, a force that can change the world. St. Ser. Of Sarov, said, "Acquire the gift of the Holy Spirit and a thousand around you will be saved."

That's what we are here for today! We are the sinners who enter the water again and let Christ pour out the Spirit not only on the Bread and Wine, but upon us when we partake of His Bread and Cup. Do you know how powerfully our Lord wants to change us? The only way to make paths straight is to really want to change, to repent, and to seek the Lord Jesus with all our heart mind and soul and love each other as Jesus. Do you really know much of a loved people you are?! The Theophany that we will celebrate is good feast to remind us. He went into the water with sinners!! He fulfilled the covenant of love by promising there to take all our sins on Him and die and rise again for them. As He stood with sinners in the water of baptism, He was crucified with sinners on either side of Him. "Prepare the way of this Lord. Make straight paths for Him that He can come change you.

Let me leave you with a few words of practically how this can happen. First, I want every family, every married couple, every individual to make a vow before the Lord: tonight before you go to bed, tomorrow before you go to work, or school. Do like my coworker and take a good look in prayer at your Savior. Take out your icons and pray. If you don't have a regular prayer life start one tonight. This is the day of God's visitation! 2. Pray for your parish, for renewal and for your being a part of it, for your priests, for all of us humble servants. WE can with Christ level the mountains and straighten the paths. 3. Start next week. Be in Liturgy as near the beginning as you can. This Liturgy is not a game, not a mere ritual. It is our ascent to the Kingdom of repentance and renewal and we need to all be part of it from beginning to end with the same eagerness as all those people coming out to be baptized at the Jordan. 4. Learn all you can about Jesus in the Bible. Learn about his ministry and life for you. Learn about all the Old Testament says about him. Pay attention to the hymnody of the Liturgy. Read the Fathers. Come to the classes on Orthodoxy. Come visit with your clergy and ask questions about your faith. Start a firestorm of Spiritual growth. What else are we here for? 5. Let's all learn more about the second baptism, the sacrament called confession which is so little understood and yet is such a powerful return to healing of Jesus. 6. Come to the Lord's Eucharist this morning in repentance, and in tears of expectation like those people who heard John and were baptized by Him. Let Jesus do as John predicted He would, In this eucharist be baptized by Jesus with the Holy Spirit. And then let's let Jesus use us here in our parish, at our work places. mention the food drive again but let's be doing these things 52 weeks out of the year, feeding poor, visiting the sick, going to nursing homes, starting a social program that will help divorced, abused, addicts, etc.. "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight His paths. And confessing their sins they were baptized." In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.