

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,"

This Sunday, December 10th is the second Sunday of Advent. John the Baptist is our guide for the first part of Advent and in this week's gospel (Mark 1:1-8), Mark begins his gospel speaking about John the Baptist as the one who will prepare the way of the Lord. The hymn we sing today, "*On Jordan's Banks the Baptist's Cry*" is very specific to the season of Advent and to the ministry of John the Baptist. The original text of this hymn was written in 1736 by the Frenchman Charles Coffin (1676 – 1749), a Roman Catholic scholar of Latin and priest serving at the University of Paris. He wrote the text in Latin and in 1837 John Chandler, an Anglican priest in England, translated it to English.

While the hymn text may not be eloquent poetry, there is depth of theology and scriptural reference behind this great hymn. The first two verses are a call to all people to "make straight the way for God within" – in other words to put ourselves in a frame of mind and heart that makes a fruitful relationship with God possible. To help this process, we confess our dependence on God's grace (v.3) and pray for the needs of those around us (v.4). Verse 5 is a stand-alone hymn of praise. It acknowledges that only God can make our personal transformation, and the transformation of the world, possible.

John goes out into the wilderness and tells us all the coming of the Lord, of the Messiah, is about to happen. That's why the hymn tells us to "Awake and hearken"; this is really important! The King is coming! This is good news! This is the joy of advent, and yet John is sent to prepare the way by preaching repentance. Why? Because Jesus came to seek and save the lost; he came to deal with the problem of sin. John told the people to prepare for the coming king by repenting of their sins. This is how we, too, are to prepare. We anticipate the second coming with joy, but in our lives we constantly flee to our Lord for forgiveness and mercy. So, this Sunday, every day, and every Advent, we remember that we prepare for Christ by repentance, and that it is by His grace alone we have faith and forgiveness.

The hymn, and the Gospels do not end here, however. Verse 4 of the hymn anticipates what comes next in the Gospel accounts. Jesus comes to John, is baptized, and begins His ministry. Jesus' ministry is marked by healing, signs, and miracles. God cares about the sick, the poor, the disenfranchised, and all others who are devalued by society. This active healing and mercy is the work of Jesus and of us, the church, today, as we care for all around us. And then in the final verse is the doxology of praise. Jesus' advent (coming) truly does set us free from sin, from death, and from all fears and anxiety forever. Today we are called to live a life of repentance and mercy, looking forward to the day when we will praise the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit forevermore. Amen.

Come and prepare the way of the Lord this Sunday
Worship service 10 AM

-