

Christmas Gifts: The Divine Alarm Clock
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Mark 1:1-8

Today we begin the “Christmas Gifts” sermon series for the month of December, where we will explore God’s gifts that lead to the glorious gift of Emmanuel.

Our passage this morning is the opening verses of the Gospel according to Mark. Mark is not one to dilly-dally with details. Rather, he gets straight to the point. So much so, that my New Testament professor claimed you can sit down and read this gospel in two hours...in Greek.

Due to Mark’s straightforwardness, you’ll notice that there’s no manger scene, no genealogy, and no mention of the Word from the beginning of time, like in the other gospel accounts. In fact, there’s no account of the childhood of Jesus at all. Mark jumps straight to the critical time of the adult Jesus, whose way was prepared by John the Baptist—the divine alarm clock—whom we read about in this passage. Hear the word of God:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And 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.⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He 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. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

Gracious and loving Lord, open our ears, eyes, hearts and minds this morning, that we might hear your word for our lives today. In your most holy name we pray, Amen.

Sermon

These days, I don't need an alarm clock to wake me up most mornings. For the past 7 years I have had little human alarm clocks whose feet come pad-padding up the stairs at the break of dawn. Actually, due to a few too many pre-dawn wake up calls, we even had to recently get our 3-year old an "Ok to Wake" clock, which turns green at 6am when it's okay for her to get out of bed. But I do remember the pre-kid days of needing an alarm clock. It would go off, and I would hit snooze once, sometimes twice, and occasionally three times. These days there are a variety of pleasant sounds to choose from on your phone to wake you up, but do you all remember the *aanntt*, *annntt*, *anntt* of the old school alarm clocks? If you happened to be in a deep, REM sleep when your alarm clock went off, it truly was jarring. It lived up to its name "alarm" clock.

In our passage for today, we meet a human alarm clock—an eccentric character named John the Baptist, who dressed in camel hair and lived on locusts and wild honey and wandered in the wilderness. Today we might label him a hippie who lives off the grid. If someone like John walked in our church doors this morning, my guess is we'd welcome him warmly, but we'd probably all be wondering internally if he might be slightly off his rocker. Truth be told, John the Baptist was eccentric even for his time and place as well. But he proclaimed a message so powerful and so compelling, that we're told folks came in droves to hear him preach and to be baptized.

The truth is, the Jewish people were ready for a modern day prophet. They had been waiting over 300 years, since the last Jewish prophet had spoken to them.

Metaphorically, they had been in a deep REM sleep, and it was time for them to wake

up. Their “OK to Wake” clock turned green when John the Baptist showed up on the scene. And so they jumped out of bed and raced down to the Jordan River.

And although Jewish ritual washings were not uncommon in those days, *who and how* John was baptizing was astounding. Previously, baptism was for Gentiles converting to Judaism. Never before had those who were already Jewish been required or asked to be baptized. Furthermore, John required repentance along with baptism. A turning away from sin as you were cleansed and then clothed in forgiveness. These were huge, unorthodox steps for the Jewish people. One would guess they would be reluctant to take these difficult steps that weren’t even required for their faith. But rather, it seems they were yearning for something meaningful in their lives. John challenged them to take the hard road—examining themselves and confessing sins. And they rose to the challenge.

This idea of taking the hard road reminds me of a song I heard this week by one of our family’s favorite people, Rachel Coleman, who’s a singer, songwriter, actress and producer of *Signing Times*¹ for children. Rachel’s remarkable story and unexpected career began with what seemed like tragedy. Like many other couples staring out, she and her husband had exciting dreams for their future family. Their first daughter Leah seemed like a happy, normal baby, but at 14-months old, they realized she was profoundly deaf.² When they decided to have another child three years later, they were sure it would be easier the second time around. But their second daughter Lucy had cerebral palsy. They struggled with their grief of not having healthy “normal” kids, but they decided to do something positive about it.

¹ <https://www.signingtime.com>

² <http://www.rachelcoleman.com/leahs-story/>

Rachel and several of her extended family members shifted their priorities. Each gave up their careers and began writing and producing songs and videos to teach sign language to kids of all abilities. 19 years later, Rachel and family members have produced over 35 DVDs full of hundreds of songs teaching sign language. Leah is in college, and Lucy is mainstreamed in high school. They have paved the way for children of all abilities to learn and live full lives. The song I'm referencing that Rachel wrote is called "The Good." In it, she sings, "Maybe we won't find easy, but baby we've found the good."³ The path they chose to pave has been a long and difficult road full of speed bumps and sacrifices, but it sure has been a good one filled with love and grace.

John the Baptist also did not choose the easy path in life, and he did not want his followers to either. John was as authentic as they get. He lived a simple life. He did not fall prey to the luxuries of his time that could kill your soul. He was the messenger who lived by the message. He practiced what he preached. He chose to be in the desert that was referred to several times in the Old Testament as "The Devastation."⁴

By his righteous example, his followers then, and we today, are encouraged to take this difficult but good path as well. His voice cried out from the wilderness and prepared the way of the Lord. And he calls others to ready themselves for the Son of God, for the long-awaited Messiah, for the king of kings. He is like an alarm clock, blaring out, "Wake up, great things are coming! But also Beware, because they're not going to come the way you expect them to, and you must be prepared."

³ http://signingtime.net/pdf/song_lyrics/ShineLyrics.pdf

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 16.

You see, at that time the Jews were expecting a warrior-like king who would battle the Greco-Roman leaders to restore the Throne of David. But Jesus the Messiah was not that at all. He would turn societal norms upside down—socializing with the culturally despised, like prostitutes, tax collectors, and the unwell in body and mind. He rode a donkey instead of a horse, wore a crown of thorns instead of jewels, and he was crucified on a cross rather than ruling from a throne. If John the Baptist, the divine alarm clock, had not prepared the way for the unorthodox and unprecedented King, Jesus might not have had the following he had. John's ministry was vital to the ministry of Jesus. John was a messenger, forerunner, a herald, a pathfinder. And his message rings out loud and clear to us today as well, and begs the question, how are we preparing the way for Christ in our lives?

Preparing a pathway requires hard work. I know this first hand thanks to my parents. When I was around 12-years old, my parents bought a lake lot, and decided to put a dock on it so that we could swim and boat in the summer. They determined our family would clear our own path down to the dock. We spent many days that Winter and Spring preparing the trail down the long, steep hill to the lake. I thought the manual weed whacking was great fun for about 5 minutes until my shoulders began to hurt. Clearing the path required all four family members on our hands and knees pulling, digging, cutting and raking. It was dirty work, and I especially remember the misery of the chigger bite episode. But the hard work paid off, and we enjoyed using that pathway for many years. And once it was cleared for friends and family to trod upon, it was much easier to maintain. Clearing the pathways in our lives for Christ requires similar hard work. It may not be hard manual labor, but it requires other sacrifices.

Things like carving out time in our busy schedules to allow space to dwell in Scripture and prayer. It requires reorganizing our priorities, digging up the things that could trip us up in life, and tossing them to the side. Things like too much online shopping, too much social media scrolling, too much of the depressing 24-hour news cycle, too much “stuff” that clutters our lives and takes up valuable sacred space. The Dave Matthews Band had a song that I think sums up our modern day consumeristic culture well, that says, “I eat too much, I drink too much, I want too much. Too much.”⁵

The truth is that we fill ourselves up to bursting with “too much” of everything else and not enough Christ. Just the other day, my kids were talking about something they wanted and one of them flippantly said, “Just order it on your phone, mom.” That statement stopped me in my tracks and caused me to reexamine the priorities I’m teaching my children. Don’t get me wrong, I love the convenience of online shopping, but if my kids think that we just think of anything in the world we want, click a button on our phone and have it delivered to our door two days later, then there’s an issue.

A true life, a good life, an authentic life is not a prime membership or an easy button. We must do the hard work of preparing our hearts and minds for Christ. If we were told that the British Royal Family was going to visit First Pres later this month, can you imagine how we’d be running around cleaning, tidying up and preparing? If we’d do that for them, then what more could we do in our lives to prepare for Christ our King?

⁵ <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/davematthewsband/toomuch.html>

As the first day of the season of Advent, today is the perfect day to begin preparing the way for Christ. Advent is from the Latin word that means coming. It's a time of expectant waiting and preparation for both the celebration of the birth of Christ as well as the future return of Christ.

One way to prepare the way is by setting and shifting priorities in our lives. I'll never forget the lesson on setting priorities I heard from a Duke University Corporate Education faculty member. He asked all the executives to bring their planners or electronic calendars to the session. He had everyone open them up and said, if you want to know your priorities, look at your calendar. These are the things you have prioritized making time for. But if you want to know what you really should prioritize, you need to think about the things in your life that are really important to you. What do you value? You need to align your values with your behavior and actions, and that's how you should prioritize spending your time. And furthermore, you need to decide today on one shift in priorities you'd like to make, and you need to set a ritual. 95% of what we do is routine. If you want to make something your value a priority, you've got to make it a routine ritual. If your priority is to do a daily devotional, then you need to carve out a time and a ritual to make that happen on a daily basis. And then you need to have a way to hold yourself accountable. If you don't make it a routine, then it will never be a priority.

We all complain about being too busy these days, and we do live in a frantically paced time and place that feels very hard to manage. But the truth is, we do have some (definitely not all, but some) power to change being quite so busy with the things that aren't priorities for us. We do not have to attend every single event, or do every single thing. We can choose, especially during this Advent season, to shift priorities and create space for Christ.

Admittedly, it's not easy, but it is possible. It requires repentance like John proclaimed, which literally means turning away. It requires us to turn away from things that, if we're honest with ourselves, some of them we probably enjoy or make us feel important, but need to shift away from in order to clear the way for Christ. The Divine Alarm clock rings out the proclamation of good news and a simultaneous fair warning loud and clear, "Christ is Coming! Prepare Ye the Way!"

As we enter this Advent season, thinking about setting priorities even as we dash our way towards Christmas, I wanted to share what a pastor friend of mine from seminary posted online recently. This friend has battled cancer as well as lost her mother this year, so she has a pretty amazing perspective on priority setting. She is another person who has not found the easy, but has found the good. She knows how hard the preparation of clearing the way for Christ can be, but she also knows the rewards, which she described in her post. We'll end with her invitation to this Advent season. She wrote, "I would like to welcome you to the month of December. May you take time to sit with twinkle lights, drink warm beverages, connect with those you love, sing—really sing—with others, hear the Christmas story of God coming to a broken world, know you are loved BIG, and rest in that peace."⁶

Amen and Amen.

⁶ Sharyl Dixon. Kingston Presbyterian Church, Kingston, New Jersey. <https://www.facebook.com/sharylmarshall>