

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

### "Good News?"

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#### **Mark 1: 1-8**

*1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

*2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,  
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;*

*3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
"Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight" ',*

*4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And 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. 7 He 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. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'*

Once upon a time, back when I was a sophomore in college, my academic advisor told me that my writing needed improvement. I found that hard to believe but it was my academic advisor speaking. He told me that if I wanted better grades on my English compositions and History research papers, I needed to communicate more clearly. With that he gave me the name of an English major on campus, one that would be willing to review my papers and make critical comments.

I recall that my next paper was to be about "The Origins of the Great Awakening in Central Connecticut." It was a fascinating subject about which everyone is curious. After I finished the paper I took it across campus to deliver it to my new tutor, confident that there would not be many corrections for him to make. A couple of nights later he called me. He said, "I have good news! You did a great job. I was really impressed with your writing." I was thrilled. That really was good news! That meant I wouldn't have to change much. Perhaps I was a better writer than I had thought.

The next day I went over to my tutor and picked up my paper. I wasn't prepared for what I found. It was covered in red ink. There were corrections to be made everywhere- from the title to the bibliography. Everything needed to be changed. I had a lot of work yet to do. While my tutor thought I showed signs of being a good

writer, it seemed that in reality I had to change my writing to really be one. Some good news that was!

On the second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist takes center stage. What a character! We wouldn't be inviting him to our Christmas parties. And you wouldn't want to be sitting next to him this morning. He dressed in fashionable camel's hair with a leather belt. He ate locusts dipped in honey. (I don't know about you but that's the only way I will eat my locusts). And he was a boisterous man. Someone once referred to him as "the Doberman pinscher of the Gospel."

The author of Mark writes that John's arrival signified the beginning of the *good* news of Jesus Christ. This is Mark's Christmas story. But there are no cute babies here, no stars, and no shepherds or wise men. There is only a strange prophet announcing vague good news. Someone was coming, someone so important that it wasn't enough to hang around and wait for him. It was time to prepare and to make his way ready. John tells the people to prepare by accepting a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Good news? While we anticipate Christmas joy, John wants us to prepare for Christmas by confessing our sins and changing our behavior. Repent. Change. His words strike like fingernails on a chalkboard. We prefer not to admit the truth about ourselves. We prefer not to change.

So often during the Christmas season, our preparation is limited to cosmetic change. Christmas is like a box we take out of our basement storage and open up, decorating our existence for a few weeks before we put it back when it belongs and we go back to where we were. We are more interested in feeling good than actually being good. We are more interested in staying the same than we are in changing.

Our shallow preparation doesn't get us far. The darkness of the past still obscures the future. The heavy burdens of the present keep us from embracing anything new. Our preparation for Christmas doesn't make our world or us different.

"Repent," John the Baptist cries. The word frightens us. What does he really mean? The word repent means "I change my mind," not in the sense that I will now drink skim milk instead of 2%. It's a bigger change. Come clean. Be honest about yourself. Make a big U-turn in the intersection of life. Adjust some of your attitudes. Reflect about some of the things that you think are most important. Be open to change.

Repent. It is not about publicly beating your chest and tearfully confessing what an awful person you are on a Barbara Walters television special. It is not about a couple of "I'm so sorry" only to return to the same path of living. Repent. Do things in a new way. Do things in a way that bring life to you and to others. Do things that allow room for God to enter more deeply into your heart. Stretch your mind and widen your heart! Understand how much you depend upon others and upon God! Recognize your need for forgiveness and also the overwhelming grace of God! Good news begins with an honest and sometimes painful look at the truth of our situation. And change can only happen when the truth is told.

Stephen Vincent Benet once wrote a Christmas play in which the wife of the innkeeper, using her woman's intuition, suddenly realizes that something momentous has happened back there in the stable behind the crowded inn. She

speaks of her feelings to her husband saying, "Something has been loosed to change the world, and with it we must change."

Such is the message of John the Baptist. The good news is that something big is coming. To receive that something big, we must change. William Willimon writes that God becomes the mirror of truth held up before us to measure what in us must change. God then becomes the way we can learn from the truth and move toward a different tomorrow. Therein lays the hope of Christmas. By God's grace we are called to change. And by God's grace we are enabled to change.