

Repent and Believe in the Gospel

"Follow Me in Anticipation" Series, December 14, and 15, 2024 | Mark 1:4-5

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Does Christmas ever leave you feeling like you're wandering in the wilderness?

Sometimes, the expectations of the season just overwhelm us.

The Wall Street Journal recently reported that the sense of being overwhelmed is growing.

They interviewed one person who has a tradition of throwing elaborate Christmas parties.

Last year the person throwing the party was decorating to a theme, and the theme led them to suspend 200 battery-powered candles from the ceiling using fishing line and Sticky-tack.

This year, that person has decided to scale back a bit. Good advice.¹

Plus, Christmas can be incredibly expensive.

Christmas gift-giving is just the beginning.

Christmas decorations can be expensive. Christmas travel costs.

Christmas parties, Christmas shows, and Christmas clothing all eat into the budget.

Christmas is the most wonderful and most expensive time of the year.

And for some people, Christmas is a lonely time.

Some people are isolated because of health and living circumstances.

Others are far from family and friends and feeling the distance.

Some are grieving relationships that are broken and people they have lost.

Some of us are worrying about our own failing health, and some of us are worrying about a broken world.

No wonder Christmas can leave us feeling like we are wandering in a wilderness.

We're out in dark places of grief and loneliness.

We're tired from all the work and spent from all the spending.

We're hungry because we're missing the familiar food that keeps us fed spiritually.

Wilderness is where we start this week in our Scripture reading.

It's familiar territory for John the Baptist, and wilderness is not always bad. Sometimes wilderness is the place where God can do new and important things.

John appeared in the wilderness.

John appeared in the wilderness in Mark 1:4:

¹ <https://www.wsj.com/style/design/how-to-make-holidays-fun-simplify-every-single-thing-9a91d043?page=1>

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The wilderness is near the Jordan River.

We'll find out in verse five that John was by the Jordan River.

It was a wilderness, and the wilderness can be a threatening place.

But sometimes the wilderness is a place to get alone, pray, fast, and recharge. That was what the wilderness was for Jesus.

The wilderness is the place of failure.

When the Bible speaks of the wilderness, it calls to mind how the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years after God delivered them from slavery in Egypt.

The road from Egypt to the Promised Land ran through the wilderness.

But in the wilderness, Israel sinned against God. Multiple times. Because of their failure, God said that they were not ready to go into the Promised Land, so they wandered for forty years until an entire generation died and a new generation was ready to take the Promised Land.

When the people of Israel took over the Promised Land, they failed again and again. Eventually, God declared judgment on them. He said that He would send invaders who would turn the land back into a wilderness. In **Isaiah 64:10** God said:

***Your holy cities have become a wilderness;
Zion has become a wilderness,
Jerusalem a desolation.***

The wilderness can be the place of failure, OR...

The wilderness is the place of restoration.

Out in the wilderness after the failure of the people of Israel, God shaped the heart of the next generation to belong to Him.

So, when God began to say through the prophets that He would renew His people, God spoke about taking them back out into the wilderness to start over again. In **Hosea 2:14** God said:

***"Therefore, behold, I will allure her,
and bring her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her."***

The wilderness, then, is like a metaphor for God calling His people back to Him.

And the wilderness is the place where the coming of Messiah would start! It would be like God paving a highway for His people to come home. In **Isaiah 40:3** we read:

***A voice cries:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God."***

But that's not the end. When Jesus returns, the world is going to be made new! The wilderness is going to bloom and prosper! **Isaiah 35:1-2** says:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;

***the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus;
it shall blossom abundantly
and rejoice with joy and singing. ...***

How does the wilderness feel to you this Christmas?

Are you in the wilderness of the Jordan River? This can be the place of loneliness OR the place of reflection.

Are you in the wilderness of failure? Are you realizing that things are not right between you and God right now? Maybe you've even lost sight of God in the middle of life.

Or are you in the wilderness of restoration? Is God doing a new thing in you right now? Or are you READY for God to do a new thing in you this Christmas?

God says in **Isaiah 43:19**,

***"Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert."***

God has done a new thing in Jesus Christ, and He can do a new thing in you today!

John preached repentance to prepare hearts.

Repentance is a change of mind and heart.

My mind is thinking one thing, and my heart is directed in one direction.

Then there is a change of thinking, a change in my heart.

Now my mind is thinking something new, and my heart is directed in a new direction.

My mind was thinking sin, and my heart was directed toward myself.

Now my mind is thinking holiness, and my heart is directed toward God. That's repentance.

Repentance was symbolized in John's baptism.

John didn't do full Christian baptism.

John did a washing. He put people under the water and brought them back up again. John's baptism picked up on the washings that were common in Judaism. People washed to make themselves physically and ritually clean. John's baptism washed people from the dirt of sin.

People came to John, he confronted them about their sin, and they were baptized to show that they had repented of their sin and wanted it cleansed and forgiven.

John's was a baptism for repentance.

Repentance isn't as simple as hitting a button.

You can't just say, "Well, I'm going to wash my hands and now I'm clean. I've repented."

In the Old Testament to repent, people would engage in liturgies and offer sacrifices.

Sometimes it was just the motions. But going through the motions misses the point.

Consequently, at times the prophets would say that God despised their feasts, their sacrifices, and their worship. They were going through the motions and missing the point.

Some things aren't as simple as hitting a button. That's why not all cups of coffee are the same.

You can put coffee in a coffeemaker and hit the "brew" button, but that doesn't mean you're going to get a great cup of coffee.

To get a great cup of coffee, you need to start with good coffee beans that are fresh. They need to be roasted well and ground well. Then the water needs to be right. The temperature needs to be right. All of those things matter if you want a good cup of coffee.

Getting a good cup of coffee isn't as simple as hitting a button.

And neither is repentance. Repentance is a change of mind and a change of heart. So, it requires that your heart be in the right condition.

What is the condition of your heart today?

Hard? Is your heart hard? That would mean that you are closed off to what God is doing in your life. You are closed off to God the Holy Spirit who is probably calling you to repentance.

Fickle? Perhaps your heart is fickle. You change from this to that. One day you are eager to hear God and open to repenting. The next day life gets tough, and you slip back into self-preservation mode.

Distracted? Your heart may be distracted because your life is so full of other things that the other things choke out the voice of the Holy Spirit in your life.

Open? Is your heart open to God's Word and God's Holy Spirit? Are you ready and willing to repent and bear much fruit? How ready and receptive is your heart today?

What is the condition of your heart today? Don't rush past this question.

Repentance is essential for preparing for Christ.

John preached repentance, and the people responded in Mark 1:5:

And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

People were genuinely confessing their sin and receiving forgiveness.

John drew a crowd from all over Judea. He even drew people—leaders—from Jerusalem.

God was working through John's ministry. Many people confessed their sin.

Their confession was genuine. They followed it up with baptism. They were forgiven for their sin because what God wants more than anything is for our hearts to belong to Him.

John was creating a new community of people preparing for Messiah.

John's baptism was more than a simple washing.

Baptism was quickly becoming a sign that said that I was one way and now I am another.

Gentiles becoming Jews were occasionally being baptized to say that they were now Jewish.

John's baptism had a hint of that about it.

John was not only preaching that people should repent of their sin and be baptized.

He was preaching that they should repent of their sin because Messiah would arrive soon. People being baptized by him were saying that they too were waiting for Messiah! Repenting, being baptized, and being part of a new community was all a way to prepare.

Preparation made all the difference in the "Miracle on Ice."

You've probably heard of the "Miracle on Ice." It was one of the biggest upsets in sports history. It happened at the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York.

The United States hockey team, a team of amateur athletes, defeated the Soviet Union's team.

The Soviet team was a hockey powerhouse and heavily favored to win.

In fact, the Soviet team had already beaten the US team in an exhibition game.

As the buzzer sounded, though, at the end of the game, the US was ahead 4-3 and Al Michaels announced, "Do you believe in miracles? YES!"

The US won. It felt like the US had won a decisive battle in the Cold War.²

But how? Why? Preparation made all the difference.

The United States team was prepared mentally and physically for that game.

The Soviet Team was not. It was a classic formula for an epic upset. Preparation matters.

Are you preparing for Christ? Repentance is essential to preparing for Christ.

Repentance isn't a robber of joy but a prelude to joy.

Repentance isn't a cure for grief but a pathway to peace.

Repentance isn't a penalty for a life poorly lived but the reward for a heart that is open.

Because God's response to repentance is grace.

And the outcome of repentance is the presence of God and newness.

Jesus is who and what we want at Christmas. HE is where we get newness, new starts, new life, new hearts, and new joy.

Repentance is essential to preparing for Christ AND to preparing for Christmas.

Are you preparing for Christ? Then...

Repentance is the way of the Lord through the wilderness of Christmas.

John was a prophet.

When people saw him and heard him, they thought of the prophets from the Old Testament.

The prophets confronted certain problems and delivered certain message repeatedly.

John acted like them and spoke like those prophets of old.

The prophets called everyone to repent, and John is calling us to repent!

What do prophets call us to repent of?

Idolatry: loving something more than God. The prophets confronted people about their idols made of carved wood, stone, metal, and jewels. They confronted them about bowing down, worshipping, and

² <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/u-s-hockey-team-makes-miracle-on-ice>

offering sacrifices to them rather than to God. Idolatry, then, is the failure to love God rightly, with heart and soul and mind and strength. And we have done that. We've failed to love God the right way. The prophets call us to repent of that.

Injustice: failing to love my neighbor. The prophets also confronted the people about the ways that they abused the poor and powerless, hurt one another, and failed to take care of their neighbors. Injustice is the failure to love our neighbors as ourselves. And we've done that too. We've failed to love our neighbors the right way. The prophets call us to repent of that.

Inwardness: loving myself and those closest to me first and foremost. Instead of loving God and our neighbors, we love ourselves. We've done that. The prophets call us to repent of that.

That's a lot of repentance! We are called to repent of a lot.

Repentance is very practical.

Repentance is a gift. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin and enables us to repent, change our minds and hearts, and turn around. In that sense, it is an inward thing that we can't control.

But repentance happens through prayer. In prayer we cry out to God and confess our sin. We turn away from our sin. We regret the sin we've done and the damage it has caused. We turn to God and to a new relationship with Him. Repentance is very practical.

Repentance is an event; it's something you can do today in prayer.

It's a habit; it's something you want to make a regular part of your prayer life and that should be a regular part of worship for you.

Repentance is a lifestyle; we live knowing that our hearts are drawn away from God and always, always turning away from sin and toward God.

When we repent, we experience something incredible.

It's like what the younger son experienced in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son.

In the parable, a father had two sons. One took his inheritance, went to a foreign land, and squandered everything on profligate living. When he was out of cash, a famine hit.

The son ended up feeding pigs to earn money and longing to fill his own empty belly with the food he was feeding the pigs. He came to his senses and decided to go home to his father to beg for mercy and to ask to be treated as a hired hand.

But while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him, felt compassion for him, ran to him, and embraced him. [Show "Prodigal" picture.]

The moment is captured in a painting by Rembrandt, "The Return of the Prodigal Son."

That's repentance, but that's also what happened WHEN we repent.

Henri Nouwen wrote a book about the painting and parable. He described the reception we get when we repent, "The father's eyes are the eyes of unfathomable mercy. They see through, to, and in the middle of brokenness." - *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henri Nouwen

The father welcomed the son home. He put a robe on him, gave him a ring, and threw a feast.

We repent, and we are welcomed home into the arms and family of God.

Are you ready to be welcomed into the arms of God this Christmas?

Advent started as a season of repentance before Christmas.

In many Christian traditions, Advent is the season leading up to Christmas.

The word "advent" means "coming." We are looking forward to celebrating Jesus' coming at Christmas, AND we are looking forward to Jesus' second coming.

Advent is torn between celebration and repentance, feasting and fasting.

By and large, our culture has gotten rid of Advent. We just jump straight to Christmas and celebrate like we're living in a fever dream.

There's no fasting. No repentance. No preparing. And maybe that's part of the problem.

How can we grasp the enormity of what God has done for us in Christ without repentance fresh each season? Maybe that's why we feel like we're lost in the wilderness.

But repentance is the way of the Lord through the wilderness of Christmas.

As the world was preparing for Jesus' ministry, John the Baptist called people to repent.

As we are preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus, John is calling US to repent.

When we repent, we turn around, and we are looking squarely into the face of Jesus.

That's the way of the Lord through the wilderness.