

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**December 4, 2011 (Second Sunday of Advent)**  
**Mark 1:1-8**  
**“Gospel Introductions: Preparing the Way”**

Imagine turning on your favorite morning talk show and a well-known business leader is being interviewed: the head of Exxon, or GE, or Bank of America. Imagine that person saying, “Yes, I’ve done good work for our company, but just wait until I retire. My successor will do wonderful things!” Or imagine a political campaign ad that says, “Vote for me. I’ll work hard and lay the groundwork for the person you vote to replace me, who will accomplish much greater things!” Who gets excited over #2? Our culture is so fixated on being #1 that being #2, being the second-best at anything (no matter how many people are worse than you), is still considered to be a failure. Yet by definition, not everyone can be #1. Lots of people can be #2’s; people who prepare the way for others, people who get things ready and made the path clear so others can succeed. But like Rodney Dangerfield, #2s don’t get much respect.

If John the Baptist was ever given a sport jersey, you can bet that he’d be issued one emblazoned with a big #2. John stepped onto the stage of history and said, “Listen to me. My successor will do amazing things!” Doesn’t that make you want to look past John in order to see if you can glimpse the One who will follow him? Mark wants us to fight that inclination. John the Baptist is the only character that Mark allows to distract him from his breathless, impassioned gospel about Jesus Christ. Mark introduced John right at the very beginning of his gospel, as part of the “good news” that he offered to people during a time of terrible upheaval and violence. Mark wrote during the time when Rome was about to conquer Jerusalem. The capital city was under siege by a violent Roman army; soon the temple would be destroyed and the people would flee. Within the Jewish community were extremist guerrillas fighting against the Romans on one side and local leaders urging submission to Rome as the best guarantor of peace on the other side. Was there a middle way, another path they should follow? Mark said “Yes,” and pointed back 35 years earlier when the Roman occupation was still relatively young. And Mark began by pointing back even further to the prophet Isaiah and other prophets, who spoke about a coming Messiah.

So before telling us about #1, Mark tells about #2, the messenger who went ahead of him, crying out in the wilderness and preparing the way for the One to come. We can learn much from John the Baptist. For example, notice that John’s gaze is always directed to the future horizon. He never says “Look at me, for I am the highpoint of history. I will help you reclaim your past glory and make everything just like it used to be in the good old days.” No, John points ahead to one who will surpass him, who is more powerful; who won’t just baptize with water that will dry off and be forgotten, but who baptizes with the Holy Spirit that fills and animates us with every breath we take.

Let me tell a story. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, everyone wanted to find a sea route to India. Columbus went west and found the Americas; Vasco da Gama went south, inching along the African coast until he rounded the Cape of Good Hope and actually found his way to India. But da Gama and his benefactor had a second goal: they wanted to defeat Islam and break the Muslim merchants' dominance in the Middle Eastern trade routes. da Gama knew that Christians had made it to India centuries before. He was sure that if he could find these true believers, he could unite Western and Eastern Christendom and destroy so-called Islamic infidels. So when da Gama landed in ancient Calicut in southwest India, he went into the temples and saw statues lining the walls. Knowing that Islam forbade images, da Gama rejoiced, believing he'd found the lost Christian churches: that the female figures were versions of the Virgin Mary, that the male statues were saints, that the monkeys and elephant-headed statues were, uh, exotic Christian local customs! da Gama had wandered into Hindu temples, but he told his Portuguese sailors to join in the temple chants with gusto, quite sure that when the Hindu priests saying "Krishna", it was just their quaint pronunciation of the name of "Christ."<sup>1</sup>

Vasco da Gama held to his own plan so tightly that he couldn't see what was truly before him. He was sure he was the one to accomplish all things, to do the Lord's bidding and cast out the infidels. By contrast, John the Baptist knew he wasn't the one. His job wasn't to point back to old dreams and glory days. He quoted the prophets' warnings of old calling people to repent, even as he steadfastly pointed ahead, keeping their eyes glued to a future that God would unfold, that God would graciously bring to pass. That's why we should model ourselves on John the Baptist and not on da Gama. Those who faithfully prepare the way know that they shouldn't get in the way, so that the Lord's future can come to pass.

Another characteristic of "preparers" is that they are patient. They rarely take shortcuts or the easy options in life. Case in point: The following is a list of the worst computer passwords ever: 12345, iloveyou, qwerty (the top left letters on the keyboard), the word "password," and my favorite, "letmein." Choosing a password that is obvious and easy to guess defeats the whole purpose of having computer information password-protected. There will always be people who insist that there are quick and easy ways to do things, but in terms of what matters, in terms of the goals that are most important, they are invariably wrong. Short cuts and quick fixes won't bear fruit for God's kingdom. It's the classic case of why nine women can't make a baby in one month. Some things worth doing take time and patience and a single-minded focus.<sup>2</sup>

Laying the groundwork, preparing the way is a time-consuming process. It involves a consistent message of faith offered in season and out of season; raising up children in the way they should go so later they will not depart from it; building upon a foundation of stone and not one of sinking sand. The little village

of Le Chambon in southern France gave refuge to hundreds of Jews during World War II, smuggling them to safety into Switzerland at great personal risk. The village was a Huguenot community, a Protestant Reformed community that had a long history of religious persecution. They recognized in the Jews another persecuted people of God in dire need of help. When scholars, years later, interviewed some of the people who provided refuge during the war and asked them whether such assistance could happen in the world today, they were hesitant to say for sure if it was possible, telling the interviewer that this type of behavior “take generations to prepare.”<sup>3</sup>

Those who prepare the way are focused on the future and patient in their work of preparation. And because they are not the center of attention, nor are they anxious to get things done as quickly as possible, they can notice what is happening around them and help get things right as they work to get things ready. Picture again where John the Baptist did his preaching. We’re told that he was out in the wilderness, away from the cities and usual places of power and worldly influence. The people were lined up along the banks of the Jordan River to wade out there to be baptized by him. There were scattered pairs of sandals, unlaced and left on the shore while their owners were out in the water near to John. He pointed to them and said, “Look there. The one is coming so exceeds me that I am not worthy to stoop down and untie his sandals.” Now ask yourself: What is scattered right around you as John the Baptist is preaching in the wilderness today? Are there bills with only minimum balances paid, next to store flyers for holiday sales, even as a voice says, “Look beyond this captivity to commercialism to a different horizon that far exceeds it”? Are there mailings seeking donations for UNICEF and Feed the Children and Red Cross and AIDS Awareness groups, even as a voice says, “Follow the One who calls us to feed and care for the needy and comfort the ill, even as his true realm of justice is waiting to be born.”

If you try too hard to be a #1, you may get so focused on all the things to be done now that you forget your true calling to be a #2, a preparer of the way. Preparers know their history but they don’t try to re-capture old glory days. They simply stand upon the foundation of history so as to point from there to God’s promised future. And preparers are patient, knowing that their work may take generations to accomplish. But that doesn’t dissuade them from working now for what is just and righteous and of lasting value. As Thoreau once said, “For every thousand hacking at the leaves of evil, there is one striking at the root.” Preparers see clearly what is right around their feet and what needs to be done, guided not by short-term gain and quick fixes, but because their perspective is long-term and shaped by faith; they trust that this is ultimately God’s world, redeemed by Christ, and held together, renewed by the Holy Spirit.

Remember: We are the preparers, not the Savior. That position has already been filled. So along with John the Baptist, we are to help prepare the way; we work now for the future; we point the way by word and deed, confessing our sins, repenting our waywardness and misdirection, and in this work discover that Mark's opening words – the "beginning of the good news" – are still as fresh and new and life-giving as ever. Thanks be to God!

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Ormsby, "The Last Crusader", review of *Holy War* by Nigel Cliff; NYT Book Review, September 11, 2011, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Quote by Molly Williamson, Chautauqua lecture, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bruce Birch, *Bible and Ethics in Christian Life*, p. 124.