

**Westminster Presbyterian Church
Vero Beach, Florida
Dr. Les Koerselman
December 4th, 2011**

First Lesson: Psalm 85:1&2, 8-13

Second Lesson: Isaiah 40:1-11

Gospel Lesson: Mark 1:1-8

Text: "Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way."

Mark 1:2b

"Reformation or Procrastination"

Thousands gathered to catch a glimpse of the casket, or to touch the lifeless form of this man. They paid homage to a fallen hero. In frenzied mourning they carried his casket from the small chapel to the grave. This man was venerated. He had built roads, bridges, hospitals, homes for the poor, and in less than 30 years he amassed over 4 billion dollars in wealth. But in so doing this man poisoned the world with drugs, and his drug trafficking touched thousands, if not millions of lives, and destroyed them.

He murdered politicians, he bribed officials, he ruthlessly destroyed those who threatened his drug cartel. To the world Pablo Escobar was an evil man capable of the most heinous crimes. But to thousands in his own country he was a hero and a savior of the poor. What emerges from such a lesson in living and life is plain as day, is it not? We will tolerate evil so long as it is beneficial to us.

The picture of society as evil, corrupt, reckless, with an abandonment of all respect is simply an enlargement of our individual lives and of the battles that rage within each of us. When we dare to speak in these terms the message of reformation or repentance is not popular. Why? Because it calls for a change in ourselves and in society. It means relinquishing long treasured ways of acting and thinking.

Noah's message from the steps of the ark was not "something good is going to happen to you today."

Jeremiah was not buried in dung up to his armpits because he said, "I'm O.K. and you're O.K."

Daniel was not put into the lions den for telling people, "Possibility thinking will move mountains."

John the Baptist was not forced to preach in the wilderness, and later beheaded, because he preached, "Smile, God loves you."

Instead, and in great contrast, what was the message of these men? Voices now long since silent, but voices that echo increasingly louder in our society today. A single word involving our total being - "Repent!"

During the past century, God raised up another prophet. Some years ago, Time Magazine honored his accomplishments (or should we say, honored God's accomplishments) through this man. The title or caption on the front of Time Magazine was *A Christian in Winter*. Pictured was an aging veteran of the Gospel, Billy Graham. His message, singular, distinctive, through all the years has never changed. It was a call to repentance. It was a query, an invitation to step out in faith and embrace a new way of living. Billy constantly trumpeted the urgency of his message, "Now is the day of salvation."

2000 years ago on desolate hillsides outside Jerusalem, near the Jordan River, there was a man preaching and trumpeting a message. That desolate region became the amphitheater for thousands of Jewish citizens who came to hear his message. They came not to be entertained, cajoled or pampered, but rather to be confronted with the truth.

400 years of prophetic silence had been broken, and now John, like the "shirracco," the great wind out of the desert, came blowing with a new message. "The axe is laid to the tree, judgment is coming." He dared to call the religious establishment of his day a "brood of vipers." King Herod was nothing less than an adulterer, plain and simple.

John looked at the people of his day and with thunderous warning called them to repentance. "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." Prepare - repent. The people heard this message of repentance and responded.

Were we to hear that message today how might we respond? There are questions for all of us. Is my house in order? Is your house in order?

Is our house, **this place we call a house of worship**, in order? Are we ready at this Christmas time of year to meet God? Does our value system match our belief system? Has our faith been clearly demonstrated in a faithless world?

A.W. Tozer, a great theologian, preacher and Christian, said that there are evidences of Christianity which can be found in a believers way of acting. In the way of his marking his own preparedness, he asked questions. He said that we will be known by the following: According to what we want most...what we think about the most...how we use our money...what we do with our leisure time...what company we enjoy...who and what we admire...and what we laugh at.

Notice John's message, the narrative is plain and simple. He was in the business of preparing for the "One" who would come after him. John made no attempt to change society. He did not seek to overthrow the government of his day. He had no plans to establish a church. John did what was most effective in his day, and is still the most effective point of attack in our day. He spoke to the individual human heart. He realized that society is transformed not without, but within. Prepare - repent.

Arthur Brisbane has a thought that is similar to John's and he puts it in terms of our every day way of thinking and acting. He said, "We may sweep the world clean of militarism, we may scrub the world white of autocracy, we may carpet it with democracy and drape it with the flag of republicanism. We may hang on the walls the thrilling pictures of freedom: here, the signing of America's Independence; there, the thrilling portrait of Joan of Arc; yonder, the Magna Carta.

We may spend energy and effort to make the world a paradise itself where the lion of capitalism can lie down with the proletarian lamb. But if we turn into that splendid room mankind with the same old heart, deceitful and wicked, we may expect to clean house again not many days hence. What we need is a peace conference with the Prince of Peace."

And so John's message is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago. The day is far spent and the night approaches, "PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD."