

Mark 1:1-8

The human **ear** is the finest audio component in the **world**, but by **itself**, it is **useless**. One of the greatest blessings the Lord gives to us is the ability to make good **use** of our ears - to **listen**. Hundreds of people throughout history have heard **voices** which seemed to have no **origin**. **Listening** to such voices usually meant **trouble**, as it did for Joan of Arc, for Mohammed, and for hundreds of others as well. Yet, as Mark begins his account of the life of **Jesus**, he **also** speaks about a voice. However, **this** voice **has** an origin. It's the voice of one calling in the **desert** - it's the voice of **John The Baptist - God's Messenger**. In our text today, the Lord exhorts us to **listen** to his voice, because as God's messenger, John is both a **herald** and a **pioneer** - and his message brings **salvation**.

Throughout his entire book, Mark pictures Jesus as an active, energetic, conquering **King**. Mark speaks of Jesus as being the **Christ** - the **Anointed One** who was set aside by **God**, and fully **equipped** to be our Prophet, Priest, and King - fully **qualified** to save all people. This individual, Jesus Christ, is the center of attention in Mark's Gospel. So, it's only fitting and proper that such an important individual would be preceded by a **prophet**. John the Baptist was a **prophet** in every sense of the word. First of all, he was a **herald** - a man who proclaimed the words and the wisdom of **God**. The purpose of a herald is to **prepare the way** for the King's coming, and also to announce His **arrival**. John did **both** of these things in a rather unusual style. He had been foretold long ago by the Prophet Isaiah, "*I am sending **my messenger** ahead of you, who will **prepare the way** for you. A voice of one calling out in the wilderness, '**Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.**'*" Actually, the first part of that quote doesn't come from **Isaiah** at all, it comes from **Malachi**. Nevertheless, **both** prophets foretell a **messenger** - another **prophet** - who would **prepare the way** for the coming Messiah.

At the time of our text, it had been some 400 years since a **legitimate** prophet had appeared on the scene, and the people were **not** going to miss out on his message! The 20 mile trip out into the wilderness region was a **difficult** one - downhill **from** Jerusalem, but **uphill** all the way **back**. Yet, John brought his message of salvation to **thousands**, as they flocked out from Jerusalem and the surrounding territory to gather at the Jordan River - to hear the **preaching** of John, and to receive his **baptism**. How strange it was, and yet how **significant**, that the people would leave the safety and luxury of their homes to go out into the wilderness, and **listen** to man who lived a very **simple** existence.

How simple **was** it? Well, we could start with his **clothes**. They were

certainly simple - woven of **camel's hair**, resulting in a very **rough** and **coarse** material - and he wore a **leather belt** around his waist. Actually, these clothes probably served a very **good** purpose, because the people would have recognized them as the **traditional garb** of a prophet. In fact **Elijah**, the prophet whom John the Baptist most closely resembles, was described **this** way, "*He was dressed in clothing made of **hair**, with a **leather belt** tied around his waist.*" Such clothes couldn't have been very **comfortable**, but they were apparently quite **suitable** for the desert. They also would have been very **durable**.

John's **food** was simple too. We're told that he ate **locusts** and wild **honey**. That certainly doesn't sound like a **typical** diet. In fact, **we** might even be **appalled** at the idea of eating big grasshoppers. But **our** opinions on the subject really don't **matter**, because it's quite clear that the **Lord** approved. And who knows, perhaps they were actually quite **tasty**. As I did some of the research for this sermon, I found a few "recipes" for the preparation of locusts. It seems that usually, they were prepared by removing the wings and legs, then roasting or baking them, and finally adding a touch of salt. Maybe **you'd** like to try roasted grasshoppers sometime, but I think **I'll** pass. However, the wild **honey** sounds a lot **better**. Actually, this wild honey was not just a **sweetener**. Rather, it was a very complete and nourishing **food** all by itself. Of course, John may have eaten **other** things too, which are not **mentioned**, but what **is** mentioned serves as a living **testimony** - showing us how little we actually **need** in order to **survive** when it comes to **physical** things. John considered God's **Word** to be much more **important**, and by his own appearance and lifestyle, he attempted to turn the thoughts of the people **away** from **selfishness** and **self-indulgence**, toward **higher** things.

However, in order to actually make that **happen**, there would have to be some **preparation** on the part of the people themselves. But what **sort** of preparations would they need to make? God sent John the Baptist to **help** them, and he **did** so - from the **inside out**. John's message was, "***Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths **straight**.***" **Every** roadway needs **preparation**. The hills and valleys need to be evened out, the trees and houses need to be cleared, and a firm **base** needs to be laid. If the **obstacles** are not removed, the road will be both **crooked** and **dangerous**. By preaching a message of **repentance**, John was telling the people to prepare their **hearts**. His purpose was to make a clear, straight path in those hearts for the **Lord** - a path which had no **obstacles** to go around. The obstacles we encounter in people's **lives** are made up of **sin**. Sin **blocks** the way for the Lord as He seeks to **enter** human hearts. So John preached, "***Repent***" - be **sorry** for your sins, believe that God has **forgiven** them, and strive to do **better** in the future! That message made the people **aware** of their sins, and the fact that

holding on to those **sins** was actually keeping them **away** from **God**. John the Baptist had fulfilled his duties as a **herald**, by clearing the path for our Savior to come.

That message of repentance is still important **today**. What was true before Christ's **first** coming, is also true **now**, before His **second** coming. The Lord is looking for **repentance** in our lives, and when we **do** repent, we will be preparing a path for the Lord in **our** hearts **before** He returns in all His glory on Judgment Day.

But John's message included much **more** than repentance. He was also a **pioneer** - a man who forged ahead into areas which had been virtually untouched by those who had come before. Mark writes, "*John appeared, **baptizing** in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" This idea of **baptism** was previously unheard of! It was a **completely new** concept. And although John was actually doing his baptizing even **before** the time when Jesus Himself **commanded** baptism, it was essentially no different from the baptism which **we** receive. It was a **Means of Grace** which brought **forgiveness** of sins, and **peace** with God.

The word **forgiveness** literally means "sending **away**." In the Bible, God describes that sending away in a variety of **word pictures** including: **removing** our sins as far as the east is from the west - or **blotting out** our transgressions, and **remembering** our sins **no more** - or casting our **mountains** of sin into the depths of the **sea**, where they'll be **drowned** forever. In the Old Testament, God even gives us a **visual** picture of the sending away of our sins. On the great Day of Atonement, a **goat** was brought before the High Priest. The priest would then place all the sins and wickedness of the **people** on the head of that **goat**. Then the goat was to be led **out** of the city, where it would carry the sins of the people out into the **wilderness**. Thus the sins of God's people would be **far removed** from them. This **goat** was known as the **scapegoat**, and of course the term is still used **today** when someone or something **gets the blame** for someone or something **else**! This **scapegoat** was a glimpse into the **future** of **Christ** - who took upon **His** head the sins of **all** people, and carried them all **away** - leaving **us** with free **forgiveness** and everlasting **life**. There can be no **sweeter** message for the Christian, than knowing that our **sins** have been **forgiven**.

That was the **message** of John the Baptist - a message of **repentance** and **forgiveness**. Jesus Himself held John the Baptist in the **highest** regard. He said, "*Amen I tell you: Among those born of women there has not appeared anyone*

greater than John the Baptist.” Yet, John didn’t even consider himself worthy of being the very **least** of the **servants** of Christ. And that wasn’t **false modesty** on John’s part either. John wasn’t trying to downplay his **own** talents and abilities. Rather, he was emphasizing how **great** Jesus is. Jesus is **eternal** - John was **mortal**. Jesus is **infinite** - John was **finite**. Jesus is **original** light - John was **reflected** light. There can be no doubt about the superiority of **Jesus**, and John made sure the people **knew** it.

John the Baptist was a **special** person in God’s plan of salvation - a special **prophet** with a special **purpose** at a special **time**. Those who **listened** to this voice crying out in the wilderness saying, “*Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near,*” ended up with an **unobstructed path** straight into their hearts for their Lord and Savior. That same message prepares the way for Jesus in **our** lives too, so He can bring **us** eternal salvation. So, **listen** to the voice of John the Baptist - **repent** of your sins, trust in **Jesus alone** for forgiveness, and strive in **thankfulness** to live a more godly life. You’ll be **glad** you did. Amen.