

Prepare for Peace

Mark 1:1-8

Introduction

On this Second Sunday in Advent, the theme is Peace. Of all the ways this year has been so messed up, this is one of them. Social unrest, politics, and stress from the virus have all contributed to turmoil and a lack of peace in the world today. At the heart of this turmoil is hatred. Let me make one thing clear, no one has a monopoly on hatred. Even though certain groups are labeled as hate-mongers, if you look at the rhetoric, those who do the labeling are just as hateful. The reason is we are all sinners who *have fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)*. This means that the problem we have with a lack of peace in our world ultimately stems from our lack of peace with God. As Paul says in **Romans 8:7-8**, *For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.* If we can't have peace with God, peace with others is just an illusion. The question for today is: "How can we achieve peace with God?"

Law and Gospel

The first part of our answer lies in the first part of the first verse in our Gospel Lesson today: *The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ ...* We begin our search for Peace with God in the Gospel. Or, more specifically in the Law and Gospel. One of the reasons for any confusion when we talk about Law and Gospel is that the word Gospel is used in two senses – a wider sense and a proper sense. In the wider sense, the Gospel is *an explanation of the Law and the proclamation of the favor and grace of God (Formula, SD, Art. V, The Law and Gospel ¶14)*. There, "Gospel" is used to refer to the whole counsel of God. *In its proper sense, Gospel does not mean the preaching of repentance, but only the preaching of God's grace (Formula, SD, Art. V, The Law and Gospel ¶16)*. This shows how the Law and Gospel work together. Without the Law, we don't know we are hostile to God. We don't know there is a problem. The Law points out our need and causes us to be troubled. This leads us to the Gospel, where the soothing balm of forgiveness is applied.

Repentance

We now see that repentance belongs to the Law. John's baptism was a *baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4)*. John's message was a message of the Law. The people had to be told that they needed a Savior. They had to be shown their sinfulness so they could repent. Repentance must be understood rightly. As Luther points out in the **Smalcald Articles**, *It is passive contrition, true sorrow of heart, suffering, and the sensation of death (Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article III, Repentance ¶12)*. This passive contrition is opposed to active or manufactured contrition, where people sometimes get the mistaken notion that God gives us the faith, but we make our own contrition. In fact, this contrition is a result of the preaching of the Law. It is God's thunderbolt, as Luther calls it in the **Smalcald Articles**. His Word is like *a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces (Jeremiah 23:29)*.

A Bridge to Forgiveness

John's preaching of the Law wouldn't do anyone any good if that's as far as it went. His baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance leads to forgiveness. It is the bridge

from contrition to forgiveness. You might say that it spans the gap between the Law and Gospel. This is how we prepare the way for Christ. This is how we prepare for peace with God. The Gospel brings peace. The Law brings us to the Gospel by means of repentance. As Tertullian says, *John's call to repentance is to lead the way, an actual remission is to follow. This is what is meant by "preparing the way."*

Forgiveness

So, when our sin is pointed out to us, we experience contrition and repent, we receive forgiveness. That's why, when John was killed, **Mark** says in **1:14-15** that Jesus came along and started preaching where John left off, saying *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel"* (**Mark 1:15**). This is the pattern of the part of our liturgy called Confession and Absolution. We confess our sins, repenting of them, and in faith, receive the Absolution pronounced by the pastor, believing that we are forgiven for Christ's sake.

Means of Grace

How do we attain peace with God? *We further believe that in this Christian Church we have forgiveness of sin, which is wrought through the Holy Sacraments and Absolution, and through all kinds of comforting promises from the entire Gospel* (**Large Catechism**, Apostles' Creed, Article III ¶154). The barrier to peace with God is taken away when we receive forgiveness. We receive this forgiveness through Word and Sacrament. Be **PREPARED FOR THE PEACE** Christ brings—repent and believe.

*May the peace of God,
Which passes all understanding,
Keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*
