

Sermon December 7, 2008

John the Baptizer appears in the wilderness. You can see him, can't you? Scruffy. Pale. Bearded. Birkenstocks. "Repent" he cries, and be forgiven. Prepare the way of the Lord.

Before introducing us to John, the author of Mark locates this character on the landscape of salvation history. He quotes from the prophet Isaiah, a familiar voice to his audience, though more than five centuries old. He quotes from Isaiah and in doing so identifies John as the prophesied "voice crying out in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord." Once he has established the link with Isaiah, Mark launches into his story.

Enter gentleman in camel hair suit, stage left. Among the gathered Jordan crowd that day, there are some who entering the water with confidence, allowing themselves to be submerged and morally restored. Others stand back suspicious; still others, religious leaders in particular, consider this prophet's ministry a threat. There we have it. A crowd of wet, forgiven sinners, lines of the hopeful guilty and a group of skeptical and or offended onlookers.

What was so offensive?

Many in the first century were preaching other gospels, claiming to be messiahs; and here was John, just one more holy roller claiming to know the Way. So why was he not summarily dismissed? Why with a chapter do we learn that John has been thrown in Jail for seditious teaching? Why was his preaching considered a threat to the religious authorities?

Well, it wasn't because he was proclaiming the forgiveness of sin. This was a common Jewish belief—that God was eager to forgive and restore. Temple sacrifices were thought to bring this forgiveness. Nor was the water problematic-- All participated in ceremonial washing before entering the temple. John's message that forgiveness was not brought about by Temple sacrifices, but rather by the contrite and repentant heart, was not entirely foreign either. The sect of the Essenes, of which John was likely a member, had been preaching forgiveness apart from the temple for years. Though many found his ideas problematic— his seeming dismissal of the Temple as the primary (if not exclusive) place where one could obtain forgiveness; his assertion that all were welcomed into God's embrace through repentance and forgiveness, and not only the literal descendants of Abraham....These gave the religious leaders pause, considerable pause, but were

not likely to land him so immediately in prison. So now that we know what wasn't the problem the question still looms...What was the big deal?

Mark began his story telling with the phrase “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” He was calling to even deeper recesses of religious memory than Isaiah. “The beginning.” This was Genesis language. Thee beginning. Creation. John's ministry was marking the beginning of a whole new world. A new creation. Now *this* was troubling. It was the beginning of the end of all that people knew and assumed about life in faith.

I want to challenge us to resist the urge to rush headlong into the excitement of Jesus' appearance, and sit with this for a moment— A new world order. And what I would like us to meditate on for a moment together, is the role of the wilderness in this radical remaking of reality.

The wilderness. The Isaiah material that is being quoted says “A voice cries out in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” The thing about Hebrew, is that there is no punctuation. Many scholars, like the community in Qumran that produced the Dead Sea scrolls, placed the quotes before “in the wilderness,” rather than after it. In other words, A voice cries out (colon): (quotation marks) “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” That would make the wilderness function not primarily as the physical location of the preacher, but rather the essential spiritual location of the believer.

Isaiah is essentially two books, written in vastly different times. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah warn the people to repent or the Jewish nation will be destroyed. Prophets were like that, get it together or we are...in serious trouble. In 587 B.C., that prophesied destruction became a reality. The Babylonian army defeated Israel and took most of the people, including all of the leadership, into captivity in Babylon. Jerusalem did fall to the Babylonians, bringing a great social, political, and theological tragedy.

Today's reading, Isaiah 40 was the first prophesy to this devastated community, post conquest. It was quite different message than before. “Comfort, comfort ye my people” was God's instruction to the prophet, and then we heard the words from today's text, “in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.”

Isaiah's audience was *in the wilderness*. They were devastated. Angry, confused, broken hearted in the extreme. How could they attest to God's love and

forgiveness when all that was precious was crumbling around them? How can we?

While most of us in this country would not place our present difficulties on par with the destruction of and exile from our land and loved ones, we all experience some kind of wilderness. Broken relationships, bankruptcy, a sick child, death of one held dear. And when tragedy strikes, the question rings out, “Where was God when this happened?” We have all found ourselves in an acute darkness, in which we were convinced that God was nowhere in sight. Or if present, God was certainly cruel, or somehow punishing us for moral failures or poor choices. Darkness. The wilderness.

John appeared opening his arms to ones in such devastation. Into this wilderness John reminds the crowd of the promise of Isaiah 40:

“A voice cries out: *‘In the wilderness* prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’”

Come, he said, offer your pain and failure, and allow God to bring about your resurrection. I am going to step out on a theological limb here and say that wilderness cries are essential for our salvation. It is *how* we prepare the way for the Lord. Our pain actually prepares the way for God to remake us. Because it is in these dark nights of the soul that a true choice is made. To yield to the silence, the absent, the mystery... to throw ourselves on God’s doorstep, admitting that we aren’t even sure God exists, but know that we have run out of solutions, run out of ways to fix our own situation, to heal our own wounds. We’re done. Devastated. Desperate. Dead.

That wilderness death is the beginning of the good news. It is the death of baptism. Those who know they are lost, can be found. The empty can make room for God. There is a reason Jesus said that sinners were closer to the Kingdom of God. It is because they were the closest to acute awareness of their own insufficiency as Lords of their own lives. It is they who could give over the reigns of their lives to a new Lord, for their pain had prepared the way.

But we struggle to get there. We who have and can do so much. We remain unconvinced that any other Lord is needed. We are like two and three-year-olds whose constant assertion is “I can do it myself. Me do.” When we sit in our pain and emptiness, we are the child who eventually admits that he can’t do it, that “me do” has only yielded frustration and ultimately and untied shoes.

Baptism is the symbol of this giving over. Death to the illusion of personal power over people and circumstances. Those who have experienced this death have prepared the way and are invited to come to the water to acknowledge their spiritual bankruptcy, and step towards God with faint hope for a new life. Longing to participate in the New World Order. That access to new life is what Mark is proclaiming. You who dwell in the wilderness, you are closest to the kingdom of God.

Often, in our pain, we can’t even get to the water. We can’t even lift our arms to yield or receive the comfort offered. We are utterly without the ability to even give up, no matter how convinced we may be that our ways have led to frustration and disappointment, we can’t even come for God’s sure for comfort. And here, here is the really Good News. That’s OK. God will lift us and take us to the water, when we can’t even move. Therein lies the humility, the repentance from our tyrannical pride. When we acknowledge that we can do nothing apart from the love of God, even repent. That is the death into which we are baptized and Jesus, is right around the corner— from John, from us. Jesus is coming. Now, and at the end of the age. And through the Holy Spirit—the comforter, who is the next baptism, as John prophesies. The Spirit is coming soon. To John—to us. God is coming to our rescue. This Advent, let us in our wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, as best we can, and allow God to get us the rest of the way to the water. Amen come Lord Jesus.

I have brought with me water from the Jordan River. Today we have an opportunity to link ourselves with this first call to baptism in the New World Order. I invite you when coming to the communion rail, to dip your fingers in the font, making the sign of the cross over your head as a sign and symbol of our baptismal wilderness rescue, through which we can come as the people of God to this table. (Water is poured.) *Amen.*