

A VOICE CALLING IN THE WILDERNESS!
Second Sunday in Advent
Rev. S. D. Spencer – Messiah Lutheran Church

Mark 1:1–8

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

So far the text!

We’re going to have a guest preacher for two Sundays in Advent, actually sort of a guest preacher. His name is John; he’s the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. He was conceived and born when his parents were well beyond child bearing years. You can call him a miracle baby, though he was expected. An angel told his father about it before John was conceived. And when Zechariah questioned out loud how this was going to happen, Zechariah lost his ability to speak for nine months so he could ponder the God’s promise in silence. Here’s a tip: Don’t ask too many questions of an angel from the Lord. You just might be struck speechless.

I will warn you ahead of time that you might not like John. He’s not exactly a warm and fuzzy kind of preacher. He probably wouldn’t make it to the top of any congregation’s short list. First of all, he’s not terribly civilized. He grew up in the wilderness, far away from princes and priests and palaces. He doesn’t mix well in polite company, so you may want to be careful about inviting him to your next party.

If you’re expecting someone with a \$100 haircut and a \$2000 suit, forget it. You’ll have to tune in to the TV preachers for that. John hasn’t seen a barber in who knows how long. Camel’s hair and leather are his idea of fashion. He looks like an Old Testament prophet, which is exactly what he is. He is the last Old Testament prophet with the power and spirit of Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah. In truth, John looks more like a homeless person off the streets than a preacher. Probably smells a bit like one too.

If you’re thinking of inviting John over for supper, you might want to think twice about the menu. Wild honey and grasshoppers are his idea of a square meal. An epicurean of fine food he’s not.

If you’re looking for someone to stroke your self-esteem, John’s going to disappoint. He doesn’t seem to think very much of himself or others. When the religious bureaucrats from Jewish headquarters in Jerusalem came to investigate John, they asked him, “*Are you the Christ?*” John said, “No.” “*Are you Elijah who was supposed to come before Messiah?*” He said, “No.” “*Are you the Prophet foretold by Moses?*” Again, he said “No.” “So then, who are you John? We have forms to fill out, paperwork to do, and ecclesiastical supervisors to report to. What do you say about yourself?”

John said, “*I’m a voice calling out in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for Him.*”

John wasn't some "look at me" religious celebrity, just a lone voice in the wilderness. John was a man held captive to the Word of God, a man whose whole identity was consumed and focused on the One coming after him. Jesus called cousin John the "greatest man born of a woman." John said he wasn't worthy to be the lowest slave who tied Jesus' shoes. Even John's baptism, ordained by God for the forgiveness of sins, was nothing more than a drop of water in a bucket compared to Jesus' coming baptism. When John's disciples were leaving him to follow after Jesus, John said, "*That's good. He must increase; I must decrease.*"

John doesn't mince words. He was nobody's lackey. He pointed his bony index finger at the soft and smooth religious types of his day, safely tucked in their cozy institutions, and called them a "brood of vipers," slithering serpents. He criticized Herod the king for his adulterous marriage to his brother's wife. That eventually cost John his head on a silver platter. Telling the truth in high places is never safe but never a concern for John, he called it the way he saw it.

John spoke the undistorted, raw truth. In a word, his message was "Repent." Turn around. You're going the wrong way. Heaven's not the way you think it is. You think it's about works, it isn't. It's about faith. You think it's about earning God's favor. It isn't. You think you have to give your heart to Jesus. Wrong. Jesus takes that piece of junk of a sinful heart and makes it His own. You need a change of mind, a new way of thinking about God and about yourself.

No bargaining accepted. If you try to bring your good works to John, he'll toss them back in your face. "Not good enough! Repent of your trying to earn God's favor." If you bring your religion and "spiritualities" to John, he'll snarl and spit out a grasshopper leg, and say, "To hell with your religion. Repent!"

If you trot out excuses about how busy you are in this holiday season and you just don't have time for this Messiah stuff, John will warn you that the axe is already at the root, and if you insist on being chaff you'll be tossed into eternal fire. If you trot out your Lutheran theology and try to make justification by grace through faith the only teaching instead of the central one, and say, "I don't gotta' do nothin' to be saved," John would push a sticky finger dripping with wild honey into your chest and say, "That's right. Salvation's free. Now bear the fruits that befit repentance."

Oh, you say this sermon isn't shaping up to your expectations of holiday cheer? John would look at you and say, "Who cares?" "Repent of your superficial cheer and learn the deeper joy of being a wretched sinner saved by Jesus."

I hope you get the picture. John wasn't a "nice guy." He probably even made little kids cry. But the kingdom of God is not about being nice. It's about dying and rising, which isn't a terribly "nice" piece of business.

Now don't think that John wasn't popular. All sorts of people gathered around him, sinners of every shape and size and gender. Adulterers, prostitutes, crooked businessmen, thieves, tax cheats, soldiers, religious losers of every kind flocked to this strange wilderness man with the macrobiotic diet and the camel hair coat.

They came with nothing but their sin and their broken, miserable lives. They came as poor, miserable sinners, confessing the utter hopelessness of their being sinful through and through, of sinning in thought word and deed, by things done, and things left undone. Sinful people, beggars with nothing to bring to God but empty hands and empty hearts all those people who flunked Religion 101.

They came spiritually naked, hungry, thirsting, empty, seeking rebirth, renewal. And John provided something new for them, something they had not seen before, a baptism, a bath. He washed them with Jordan River water. This was the same Jordan water that had split in two when the children of Israel took possession of the Promised Land under the hand of Joshua. The Jordan water that cleansed Naaman, the Syrian general, of his leprosy. That water-Word from John brought a fresh start, a new life, a rebirth and renewal, "Repentance unto the forgiveness of sins." This was the way for a sinner to live before God in peace.

At the Jerusalem temple, you provided a sacrificial animal in order to be forgiven. You confessed your sin to the priest, and laid hands on the animal. And then its throat was slit, its blood poured out, and its body roasted in the fire on the altar. That was your absolution. It was God's provision, the life of the animal for your life; its blood for your atonement.

New wine calls for new wineskins. The old religious forms were coming to their end. John was recalling Israel back to the wilderness for a fresh start, away from Jerusalem, the temple and the sacrifices. Those were going to be fulfilled in the death of God's Lamb, Jesus. Baptism was a new wineskin. A new way of forgiveness. Not in the shedding of an animal's sacrificial blood, but in a washing with water and the Word that someone else poured on you. Don't imagine for a second that this was bloodless forgiveness, however. The blood for this baptism comes from the cross, from the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

John's baptism was a foretaste, a preview, a bridge between the old and the new. Jesus' baptism is the main event, bringing water, Word, and the Spirit together with His own death and resurrection in a salvation flood that now saves you.

Mark, the evangelist, says this is the "beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." This is where the Gospel always begins. With preached Word and Baptism. That's where it began for each of us, and to that beginning we return every day. The Word has reached your ears, calling forth repentance and faith. You have been baptized in Jesus' greater Baptism, of water and the Holy Spirit, united with Him in His death, His resurrection, and His ascension.

The church stands in John's sandals in these end times - preaching, baptizing. Prepared by Christ and preparing the world for Christ. Like camel's hair and leather, we're not terribly fashionable, not in step with the world. Confessing sins, being absolved, hearing the Word, eating and drinking Christ's body and blood. As far as the world is concerned, we might as well be chewing on locusts and wild honey. No wonder much of the world considers us losers.

John would approve. By the gift of God, you and I have been given to join the ranks of the losers, those who have lost their lives in Jesus, who have died to self and to the world, who are nothing in our selves so that Christ might be everything in and through us.

The church's voice still calls in the wilderness: Repent. Be baptized. Get ready. Christ is coming. The world may call you a loser but you are a winner, prepared and made ready for all eternity in Christ Jesus. For through His blood and by His death all yours sins have been forgiven, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. For Jesus sake and in Jesus name, amen and amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and mind in Christ Jesus, AMEN.