

A Different Kind of Light

Mark 1:1-8

December 7, 2008

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God!

There are a number of reasons why it is good that we read this passage from Mark's gospel now, instead of at Christmas.

At Christmas, we expect the story that is familiar. For Mark, he either didn't know the familiar story about the shepherds and the angels; the swaddling cloth and the manger; the wise men and the star – or he didn't think it was important enough to mention. Mark doesn't start his gospel with a story about how Jesus came to be. He starts it with an announcement: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

And in order to meet Jesus, Mark introduces us to John.

Having to go through John to meet Jesus is another reason it is good to read this story today rather than on Christmas Eve. Not only because – with his camel hair and leather wearing, honey and locust eating, hell-fire and brimstone preaching – John wouldn't fit in here well through the soft glow of candles and sweet melody of "Silent Night" – but also because John has a different function. John's function is to prepare us to meet Jesus.

John prepares us to meet Jesus by calling us to repent. To turn around from our sinful ways. In Mark, John the Baptist is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke; "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

To prepare for Christmas and the coming of the Lord, Mark leads us into the wilderness to repent. To get to Jesus, you have to go through John.

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Over Thanksgiving, we visited my family in Kansas City – and found out that in order to get to Kansas City, you have to go through western Arkansas.

Now I think Arkansas is a fine state. The highway that leads through Fayetteville and Bentonville is breathtaking – with the Ozarks

framing the horizon. But to get there from Shreveport, you have to follow highway 71 through a two-lane stretch that takes you through some pretty interesting country-side.

We passed a couple of churches along the way – and by couple, I mean 87. There were signs – you’ve seen them – “Jesus is the answer – what is the question?”; “2 Nails + 1 Cross = 4Given”; “Eternity is a long time to spend on fire...” Many of the signs in front of those 87 churches had to do with repentance – with acknowledging sin and turning to Christ.

It is easy to poke fun at struggling churches whose sole message seems to be “Repent and believe!” Sometimes, when nothing else works – scaring people is your best bet. But here the thing – repentance is not just about scaring people. It is about preparing people. And, done well, it is surprisingly effective.

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Repentance was John the Baptist’s main message. Repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

Here was this wild looking man, confronting people with their need to repent and acknowledge the ways that they have fallen short of God’s vision for their lives, preaching...not in the city streets, or in an evangelical mega-church...but in the wilderness. And – remarkably – people came.

Did you notice that? People came. People from the whole Judean countryside; and all the people from Jerusalem. Country folk and city folk. Crowds of people came.

You see, John was a big deal. In the book of Acts, written well after the resurrection, we hear about Paul discovering groups that were “followers of John.” During Jesus’ time, Herod Antipas had John imprisoned and martyred because his teachings posed a threat to Herod’s rule.

In Mark’s gospel, what John did was point backwards. Even his appearance was a throwback – it reminded people of another day and

time; his diet of locusts and wild honey reminded people of the prophet Elijah – and of a time when there was great hope for a messiah.

John points us backwards – not for the purpose of being nostalgic – but so that we can gather ourselves for what is to come. John points us backwards – not just in his dress – but with his message. Repentance and confession cause us to look back on our lives – to practice retrospection – as we prepare for new thing that God is going through Jesus Christ our Lord.¹

John was a big deal. He shows up in all the gospels. The prologue the fourth gospel describes John: “There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.” The gospel writer interrupts his prologue to make sure that we understand that Jesus – not John – was the main attraction.

John was a big deal. People came from all over to hear John preach. It wasn't convenient for them to traipse out into the wilderness. If you heard to hear John preach, you had to want to be there. And there were crowds of people who came – all to hear a difficult word: repentance.

Fred Craddock said it well:

“What's frightening about listening to John preach is that he puts you in the presence of God. And that is what everybody wants, and that is what everybody doesn't want. Because the light at the altar [of God] is different from every other light in the world. In the dim lamps of this world, we can compare ourselves with each other, and all of us come off looking good. We convince ourselves that God grades on the curve, and what's the difference? We're all okay. And then you come into the presence of God, and you're at the altar, and it's all different.”²

¹ Copenhaver, Michael (*Feasting on the Word*, David Bartlett and Barbra Brown Taylor, eds., Westminster John Knox, 2008) pp. 45-49.

² Craddock, Fred (“Have You Ever Heard John Preach?” from *A Chorus of Witnesses*, Tom Long and Cornelius Plantinga, eds. Wm. Eardmans, 1994) pp. 35-43.

Repentance – coming face to face with who you really are in the presence of God. It is what everybody wants, and it is what everybody doesn't want.

Repentance is good for the soul. Not because it makes us feel guilty about who we have been or who we haven't been – but because it helps us to be better.

When we allow ourselves into the presence of God we see things more clearly. The rough spots of our character are exposed.

Held up to the light of the presence of God...

Our self-righteousness that so often cloaks itself in the labels of both “liberal” and “conservative” is made plain.

Those of us who are full of ego and pride are laid bare.

Those of us who think we are unworthy are made to feel whole.

The selfishness that prevents all of us from truly loving our neighbors is brought into view.

And when we see ourselves in that kind of light – then we can be grateful that God does not condemn us for our faults. And we can also be grateful that God calls us to change. The word repentance in the Greek is *metanoia* – it means to turn around. To go a different way. To put on a new life. John called it baptism – it was the way to prepare ourselves to meet the Light of the world.

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John preached repentance...and the forgiveness of sins...in the wilderness. And people came. We should not be surprised – because the good news of God entering the world in Jesus Christ is that compelling. It causes us to take a fresh look at who we are. It makes us want to change. It reminds us that there is something greater in store for us than the world we now see.

About ten years ago the journalist Jonathan Kozol wrote a book documenting the lives of children who lived in at-risk neighborhoods in our country. A good friend reminded me of a story he told. One of the children Kozol interviewed was an 11 year old boy named Anthony.

Anthony wrote an essay about heaven, or the Kingdom of God. It begins,

“God will be there. He’ll be happy that we have arrived. People shall come hand in hand. It will be bright, not dim and gloomy like on earth. All friendly animals will be there, but no mean ones. As for television, forget it! If you want vision, you can use your eyes to see the people that you love. No one will look at you from the outside. People will see you from the inside. No violence will be there. There will be no guns or drugs or IRS. You won’t have to pay taxes. You’ll recognize all the children who have died when they were little. Jesus will be good to them and play with them. At night he’ll come and visit your house.”³

Anthony’s is a vision of the Kingdom of God for which we wait.

Advent is about getting ready to experience the compelling good news of the Word made flesh. It is about preparing ourselves to meet the Light of the world when he comes.

And when he comes – we won’t miss our old lives or our old ways. We won’t mind looking back upon who we were with an awareness of how we missed the mark. Because we will have new life – a new life in Christ that is full beyond our imagining. A life that is made perfect by the purifying Light that is coming into the world.

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Amen.

³ Kozol, Jonathan (*Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*, HarperCollins, 1996) as found in the Rev. Chris Tuttle’s Portable Snack paper on this text.