



## **“Preparing the Way” December 4, 2011 Advent 2, Year B Mark 1:1-8**

“John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

**In** non-liturgical churches all across America, preachers are preaching sermons about wandering magi, lowly shepherds, a recalcitrant inn keeper and two nervous parents huddled together in a barn somewhere in Bethlehem.

But, in churches which follow the lectionary, preachers all across the globe are preaching on John, that strange wilderness prophet wearing camel’s hair and a leather girdle. He ate locusts and honey and called the people of Israel to the Jordan for a ritual cleansing for the remission of sins.

Admittedly, it’s a strange thing to be preaching about as we’re attending Christmas parties, exchanging gifts, and thinking about the Christ Child born of humble birth. When was the last time you saw a giant 30-foot inflatable “John the Baptist” lawn decoration or received a “John the Baptist” Christmas card?

John is a strange character. He hovers somewhere between the Old and New Testaments, between and old and a new covenant.

He is mentioned in all four Gospels. He’s also mentioned by the Jewish historian Josephus.

Mark simply says that he emerged or appeared in the wilderness one day—as if he were more an enigmatic phenomena than a person.

Luke presents us with the rather outlandish and unbelievable proposal that he was actually Jesus’ relative; a proposal which Raymond Brown has said is “of dubious historicity.”

One thing’s for certain about John: He was a wild, weird, wilderness rebel.

Contemporary people, for the most part, like their religious leaders to be champions of conventionality and the status quo, straight-laced preachers unadorned with tattoos or piercings or other subcultural symbols of rebellion. I surprised I’ve gotten away with my beard as long as I have.

But, in the ancient world, people liked their holy men to be bizarre, unconventional, and honestly a little crazy. Isaiah walked around naked for three years straight. Ezekiel laid on his right side for 390 days, and then on his left side for another 40 days, all the while eating barley cakes cooked over human poopoo. Elijah had a couple of she-bears maul 40 kids who’d made fun of him for being bald. Apparently, prophets can be extremely sensitive about male pattern baldness. Like I said, people liked their prophets and holy men to be a little crazy.

By comparison, John seems rather tame. His camel hair shirt and leather girdle seem rather prudish compared to Isaiah's nudity, and his diet of locusts and honey certainly beats out Ezekiel's nasty barely cakes. John never calls upon wild animals to maul misbehaving children. Instead, he calls the people of Israel, great and small, out to the river Jordan for a powerful ablution that washes away sins for good.

Mark begins his Gospel, not with the birth of Jesus, but with the baptism of Jesus. Just as the prophet John emerges in the wilderness as if out of nothingness, so too Jesus emerges in Mark's Gospel as a disciple of John—a follower who heeded the call to baptism.

For Mark, the anointing and commissioning of Jesus happens at his baptism; God is pleased with Jesus, opens the heavens and descends upon him, anointing him as Son of God.

From thence on, John and Jesus seem to part ways and spin off in different directions. It's an amicable arrangement, for sure, but John continues with his preaching and Jesus begins his itinerant ministry.

John's preaching, boiled down to its core, is pretty simple: Repent, for the kingdom of God is coming; it's time to get right with God, or else. John believed the messiah to be on his way, and John saw himself as preparing the way for the messiah's arrival.

The preaching of Jesus was, in fact, not that different from John's. Jesus' preaching, boiled down to its core, was pretty simple as well: The kingdom of God has come upon you, NOW. Here it is, here and now. So, are you going to get right with God and be a part of the kingdom, or are you going to stand in the way?

Did you hear the difference? John cried out in the wilderness: the kingdom is coming; it's on its way! Jesus preached: The kingdom is here, NOW. It's here in me. It's standing right before you. Are you going to follow, or get left behind?

By the time Apostle Paul came on the scene, the preaching of the Gospel evolved one step further. Paul preached: We have seen the kingdom in Christ Jesus; so, if you wanna get right with God, you gotta get right with Jesus. Amen.

In a way, we need a good John the Baptist in our age. We need someone or something a little unconventional and unexpected to wake us up and tell us to "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is STILL coming, STILL drawing near, STILL breaking in on us, STILL being revealed in Christ Jesus!"

Yes, Jesus revealed to us the Kingdom of God, but there's still a lot of Kingdom to come, is there not? We live in a world still brittle with death and sin, violence and hatred. We have much to learn about being citizens of God's realm, about being a people of compassion, kindness, and grace.

We need someone or something like the Baptist, someone that reminds us to repent, behave, pay attention, and get ready for the terrible and swift Day of the Lord.

My friends, I believe we do have our very own John the Baptist. He made his first appearance in our midst, almost out of thin air, about six months ago during our Youth Sunday Service. “You gotta get right with Jesus.”

About six months ago, a Baptist of our own came among us and interrupted our Youth Sunday Service. During Catherine Caroon’s wonderful sermon, a strange voice could be heard, almost as if out of thin air. We all looked around, puzzled, wondering who could be so rude as to interrupt sweet Catherine as she shared with us a touching and powerful sermon.

Finally we could hear the words of the Baptist preacher next door saying to us: “You gotta get right with Jesus.”

Now one might be tempted to write that off as some kind of fluke, some kind of glitch whereupon our wireless receiver picked up his wireless microphone. But, I don’t believe that for a minute.

I think God knows that every once in a while a bunch of Presbyterians need to be reminded by a Baptist to get right with God.

There are some striking similarities between brother Ty and John the Baptist. For one, they both like to submerge adults in pools of water for the remission of sins. Secondly, they both like to wear leather, only brother Ty wears his leather when he’s riding his motorcycle.

I doubt that Brother Ty has ever eaten locusts and honey, but who knows what can fly in your mouth as you ride on a motorcycle. As a man of the south I’m sure he’s eaten his share of turnip greens and corn bread, fried chicken and honey biscuits, which is Mississippi’s version of wilderness food.

Brother Ty’s probably as close as to our own Baptist as we’re going to get, and I’ll never forget hearing him preach to us: You gotta get right with Jesus!

Advent is much like the season of Lent. It is a season of reflection and repentance—it is a time to ready ourselves, and prepare our communities for the good news of Christ’s birth, life, death and resurrection.

Advent draws us toward Christmas through penitence, meditation, and self-examination. Advent challenges us to get right with our God, the creator of the universe, who chose to be born among the poor and lowly of the earth, taking on the form of humanity, and being obedient in all things, even unto death on a cross.

As we come to the table this morning: Let us come seeking forgiveness and repentance. Let us lift up to God all that we have done wrong, and ask that it be washed away in our baptism.

Let us approach this table with fear and trembling.

My friends, let us heed the Baptist’s call; let us get right with Jesus.

Amen.

