

## **John the Baptist (Dec 7, 2014)**

### **Mark 1:1-8 by Patty Friesen**

John the Baptist is a bit of a nut job. He shows up every Second Sunday of Advent just to remind us that Advent isn't all about angels and babies. Advent has a judgemental, apocalyptic edge to it as embodied in John the Baptist. He fits right in with the crazy prophets in the Old Testament. Elijah wore a leather belt and lived in the desert, eating strange things brought to him by ravens. The prophet Isaiah ran around naked. Hosea married a prostitute and named his children terrible names and the prophet Jeremiah ate...well, you'll have to read the story for yourself. After the doom and gloom of the Old Testament prophets, we're ready for a little good news. Then John comes along and calls us a brood of vipers who will not escape the wrath to come. No wonder Herod's daughter wanted his head on a plate. It was the only way to shut him up!

Advent begins our year's journey through Mark's gospel. Mark was the first gospel written to the persecuted Christians in Rome during the time of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The author Mark is believed to be the disciple who followed Jesus to his trial but ran away without his clothes. He likely is also the John Mark who went on Paul and Barnabus' first missionary journey but

bailed on them halfway through which led to Paul and Barnabus' breakup in Acts 15 when Paul refused to give Mark a second chance. From this scaredy cat disciple comes this short punchy gospel that states the facts of events of Jesus' life without much theologizing on them.

Mark uses the word immediately often, "Immediately, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, immediately Jesus went up to Galilee." This use of immediately creates urgency and a sense of action of prophecies made and fulfilled in Jesus. Mark doesn't mess around with the virgin birth but launches right into a proclamation, "The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Mark begins with subverting a Roman declaration that was written by Caesar on the gates of all the cities and is still evident on the gates of Ephesus, "The gospel or good news of Caesar, the high priest and son of God." Mark begins with a political statement declaring Christ as Son of God, not Caesar. John the Baptist then establishes Jesus' identity as the one who fulfills Isaiah's promises concerning the Messiah, the Christ, the chosen one. While John the Baptist is the only human to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God in these initial chapters, God confirms Jesus as his beloved son during his baptism and the unclean spirits also recognize Jesus as the Son of God.

Mark subverts the Jewish prophets. The prophet Malachi envisioned the site of Yahweh's epiphany to be the Jerusalem temple, "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (Malachi 3:1) Mark 1:3 says, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord. It could also be read, The voice of one crying out, In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. The emphasis is on the wilderness which appears nine times in Mark's Gospel. The wilderness is a desolate place where the only things to eat are locusts and wild honey. Symbolically, it was the site of a community in flight such as in the Exodus and a refuge for the persecuted faithful who await deliverance.

At this time in the wilderness beside the Jordan River lived the community of the Essenes, a Jewish sect that looked upon their wilderness community as the place in which the righteous prepared the way of the Lord. It is this desert community in which the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in 1949 – the first gospels preserved in earthen jars which is one of the greatest archeological discoveries of our time. The Essenes practiced their Jewish faith, not at the religious center, not at the temple in Jerusalem but in the desert by the Jordan River where they practiced ritual cleansings and baptisms. Here the Essenes waited and prayed for the Day of the Lord, a day of judgement and freedom for the Jewish people and baptized people into their sect. Baptism was a ritual that showed one was

reoriented to the Essene way of life. The Essenes were non-violent but there were other Jewish sects that were revolutionary and Rome looked to stamp out all these sects.

The desert location immediately makes us think of the prophet Elijah who took refuge in the desert. The prophet Malachi warns, Behold I will send you Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord arrives (Mal 4:5) John the Baptist comes along out of the desert but baptizes people not into the Essene sect but into a new nation of the repented and forgiven. His message was to point past himself to one coming who was more powerful who would baptize, not with water but with the fire of the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist looks and preaches like Elijah who escaped to the desert from Queen Jezebel and King Ahab who were killing the prophets of the Lord. Queen Jezebel and King Ahab are the scariest couple in the Bible. They actually showed up at the Osler Mennonite Youth Event on Halloween and they were scary but not as scary as the pink rabbit hiding in the corn maze. You just never know who is going to show up at a yut event.

The thing about John the Baptist is that he doesn't try to escape the dangers that come with his message. If the wrath is coming, that includes him.

He doesn't hide but is visible enough to be captured and beheaded by King Herod. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in New York City when WWII broke out and his American friends urged him not to return to Berlin but he said, If I don't stand with the German people in their darkest hour, the church will have no voice when the war is over. Palmer Becker, long time worker for Mennonite organizations was travelling on behalf of Mennonite Central Committee this summer in Palestine during the bombing of Gaza. He said while other NGO's got out of Gaza, MCC workers continued bringing in medical supplies and food. He said he was never so proud to be a Mennonite Christian.

John the Baptist still applies to us today. We are all preparing the way for someone else. As interim pastor, I'm a John the Baptist, preparing the way for the next pastor to come to Osler Mennonite. It may require doing some crazy things sometimes. We all are preparing the way for the next generations in our families and at church by praying for them, by buying stuff at their fundraisers, by setting an example in our faith and trust in God and calling the next generations to follow Jesus. Let us pray...