

“What Does John the Baptist Have to Tell Us About Christmas?”

Mark 1:1-8

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This morning, I am asking the question, “What does John the Baptist have to tell us about Christmas?” At first thought, we would probably say, “Not Much!” After all, you won’t see any images of him in any creche scenes. There are no Christmas carols that sing his praise or Christmas cards with his image on the cover. Nor will you find any John the Baptist ornaments adorning any Christmas trees. He really doesn’t become an important figure in the gospel story until both he and Jesus are already into their early thirties and that’s many years AFTER the account of his birth.

What strikes you in the opening verses in Mark is that it doesn’t contain the infancy narrative as you would find in Matthew or Luke. Mark was the EARLIEST of all the gospels, dated to around 70 AD or almost forty years after the crucifixion of Christ, and anywhere from 10 to 30 years before any of the OTHER gospels were even composed. It is generally considered by biblical scholars to be the most HISTORIC of the four biographies that open the New Testament and therefore the most AUTHENTIC account of our Savior’s life that we possess. Thus, it has to strike one as strange that the traditional story of Jesus and his birth in a manger in Bethlehem would be EXCLUDED from THIS particular gospel, the FIRST and MOST RELIABLE version of the life of Christ.

Furthermore, if Mark dispenses with the traditional story concerning our Lord’s birth and the unusual events that surrounded it, we are instead introduced to him at his BAPTISM where Jesus is immediately declared to be the Son of God and we are told that this book is all about the “good news” of his coming. Thus, instead of Bethlehem and choirs of angels and the Holy Family surrounded by smiling animals in the back of a dilapidated garage along with the subsequent visit by a group of Magi, he immediately presents us with his COUSIN first- a wild-eyed, shaggy haired Old Testament prophet named John who is proclaiming repentance for the forgiveness of sins in the wilderness of Judea. Rather than the babe in swaddling cloth that we’ve come to expect, we encounter an eccentric hermit clothed in camel’s hair who wears a leather girdle around his waist and dines on locusts and wild honey. He describes himself as one crying in the wilderness, calling all persons to forsake their sinful ways and declaring judgment upon those who refuse. He comes across as a somewhat stern, angry, and even self-righteous man- not exactly the kind of character you would want to encounter in our Christmas stories. This is the time of year when you’d rather keep things light and festive and not have to deal with such dreary themes as sin and repentance. Let’s save all that for Lent and Easter, the time on the church calendar when Christians are challenged to become more introspective and deal with their “inner man.”

Moreover, there is no Bethlehem mentioned in Mark’s “Christmas” story. Instead, we see that John is a man of the DESERT- an arid and barren region that lends itself more to SILENCE and SOLITUDE, just the OPPOSITE of what you would call the Christmas spirit.

One goes into the desert to ESCAPE people, not ENCOUNTER them. You retreat there to find out things about YOURSELF, not OTHERS. It is an empty and foreboding place that people go to escape the distractions of city life so as to hear the voice of God and no one else.

The notion of Christmas and the idea of stretches of barren wilderness seem so antithetical to each other. Christmas is a holiday that celebrates over-indulgence; it is a time when people come together to enjoy eating and drinking and dancing and festivity to excess, although THIS year, that will all be muted if not CURTAILED due to the coronavirus pandemic. This is why we find ourselves attracted so much to the image of Christmas as portrayed by Charles Dickens in his writings. Dickens didn't believe that love of others demanded sacrifice or self-denial. He thought there was already too much of that in the world- already too much ignorance and poverty and unemployment. Rather, his ideal world was one of abundance- a human feast filled with goose and gravy, plum pudding and punch, music and dancing and merriment. The LAST thing he or anyone else for that matter would want to think about during the Yuletide season is SELF-DENIAL.

Yet, it is in the WILDERNESS and NOT Jerusalem and NOT in Bethlehem where Mark chooses to open his gospel and introduce us to Jesus. This is because the desert is not just a geographical locale in the scriptures, it is the place where the people of God must go in order to FIND and ENCOUNTER him. In Deuteronomy, Moses tells the Israelites why it was necessary for God to lead them through the wilderness:

*Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and test you...He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.(Deut. 8:2,3)*

Time and again, it was in the WILDERNESS that God confronted his people. It was in the DESERT that God encountered Moses in a burning bush; the DESERT where he led his children--the Israelites--through forty years of wilderness wanderings; in the DESERT where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, and where Elijah confronted the still, small voice which was God at Horeb. Even in the New Testament, it was in the DESERT where Jesus was tempted by Satan and where Saul would become Paul, the greatest of the Apostles. The Lord leads his people into the BARRENNESS OF THE WILDERNESS to cut them off from all their supports and resources so that he HIMSELF might become their support and most important resource. Thus, the wilderness is a place of TESTING where we learn PATIENCE and HUMILITY and most importantly, TRUST IN GOD.

It was in the wilderness that John could be found preaching a message of sin and repentance. Repentance is one of those religious terms which really has a very simple meaning- it means to do an "about-face." It requires a "turning from" as well as a "turning toward"- we "turn from" everything that hinders our relationship to God and one another so that we might "turn toward" and receive God himself. THIS is repentance. Even more than a change of mind, it is a new change of WILL. It is a 180-degree change in DIRECTION so that we're no longer proceeding down the same self-destructive path we were on but rather are now focused on loving God and performing HIS will. However, when John says that after him is coming one

who is MIGHTIER than himself, that where he baptizes with water, Jesus will baptize with the HOLY SPIRIT, he is saying God is offering people so much MORE than mere forgiveness when they repent- he is offering them NEW LIFE! He is offering them NEW POWER! God is offering people HIMSELF through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Of course, the LAST thing people want, ESPECIALLY at Christmastime, is to have to wrestle with questions of guilt and repentance. Rather, it's the one time of the year we want to feel GOOD about ourselves. This is a great part of Christmas's appeal, that it is a time for recapturing our long-lost childhoods once again. It is a time for indulging in the sweet and nostalgic memories of an idealized past. That's what all the Christmas songs and holiday movies on the Hallmark Channel continue to tell us, don't they?

But the message that John preaches is that with repentance, comes the gift of SALVATION and NEW LIFE. When he says, "prepare the way of the Lord," that call to preparation is a quotation from Isaiah 40, v. 3. For Isaiah, the wilderness is a place for new beginnings. Isaiah's wilderness is the reverse of the wilderness of Sinai- Sinai being the place where the Israelites worshiped the golden calf. As a result, God led them over the next forty years throughout the desert until that whole generation of people had died off. Therefore, the Sinai wilderness was a place of rebellion, failure, and death for Israel. But in Isaiah 40 and later chapters, the wilderness is a place of REJOICING, a place of ABUNDANCE, a place of NEW LIFE and BLESSING for Israel. In Isaiah 40, the wilderness becomes the location of a NEW EXODUS for the people of God. In THIS wilderness, streams of water will flow, pillars of light will illuminate the way, and cedars and myrtles, fig trees and cypress will dot the landscape. It is a VIRTUAL PARADISE, a GARDEN OF GOD.

Thus the wilderness that John proclaims signals the arrival of a new era for God's people. The new age has arrived. "Prepare ye the way of the Lord," he shouts. In Christ Jesus--God's true Son--the age of fulfillment has finally arrived. The kingdom of God and the promise of redemption that comes with it has now come and it is the beginning of all new things. Hence, the journey through John's wilderness will find its fulfillment in none other than Jesus Christ.

Well, that's my commentary on these scriptures. Let me summarize what I've said thus far: Unlike Matthew and Luke which begins with the story of Jesus's birth, the gospel of Mark starts off with his baptism at the hands of John the Baptist. Thus, instead of the baby Jesus, we confront a rather stern and impassioned prophet in strange garb; instead of traveling to Bethlehem and that familiar manger scene, we find ourselves venturing out into the barren terrain of the Judean wilderness; and instead of the message of "peace on earth, good will towards all," John declares the need for each of us to repent for the forgiveness of sins. This is not what any of us would ordinarily think of as a Christmas message much less a text we would find particular COMFORT in. And yet I would argue that it is really MORE of a "gospel," MORE of a message of "good news" for us than we might often find in the traditional Christmas account we have all come to know and love.

After more than thirty-five years of pastoral ministry, I've come to the conclusion that most people REALLY want a religion that will make them FEEL good as well as help them to manage their lives a little better. That's why at Christmas time, we immerse ourselves in

nostalgia and all those sentimental images such as chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Frosty the Snowman, and Santa arriving on his sleigh- it all adds a little MAGIC to our holidays. The problem becomes when the REAL message of Christmas never gets put across- when it gets watered down so that we can digest it a little easier. For instance, we conveniently like to edit out from the traditional Christmas story the “scandal” that God came to us as a helpless infant in love. But rather than welcoming him with open arms, we threw him out of the inn to be born among the animals. This indignity is followed up with Herod’s attempts to kill him by systematically murdering every male child under the age of two. Thus was fulfilled the prophecy in Jeremiah, "In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and would not be comforted, because they are not." Christmas may be a time of joy for US but for those mothers who lost their first-born sons, it can only be a reminder of their DEEPEST HURT. Yes, Christmas is as much a story about GENOCIDE--the mass murder of infants--as it is about the birth of one in a manger in Bethlehem. Yet, because that appalling event in the Christmas saga would certainly undermine all the Currier and Ives/Norman Rockwell sentiment that our television commercials and popular music work so hard to generate, it is conveniently buried and hardly ever mentioned.

In fact, if we're honest, we'd have to admit that this holiday's MAIN appeal appears to be that it offers us a brief RESPITE from reality. It helps us to FORGET our pressing problems and debilitating pains, and allows us to experience--no matter how brief--the fantasy and magic we usually associate with childhood once again. If preachers and television producers sanitize the Christ story to limit it solely to a cute story of angels and shepherds and wise men and mangers, it's probably because they give us exactly what we want- a story that's universally tame and sweet and comforting, unlike the ACTUAL event which was filled with instances of horror and death and grave uncertainties.

Well Mark REFUSES to let us ESCAPE from reality, ESCAPE from the sense of barrenness in our own lives, and ESCAPE from the need of repentance so that we might experience new beginnings. Mark’s story is REAL! His gospel is ALL ABOUT reality, ALL ABOUT God meeting us at the point of our deepest needs. As it did then, it speaks to us TODAY about the need for repentance and yet finding MORE than forgiveness but NEW LIFE with a NEW SPIRIT! Mark tells us that the wilderness is where God lives, and if we would meet him and hear him, we TOO must learn to make our way out into the desert, ESPECIALLY at Christmastime. The wilderness is the one place where we are alone, totally alone, REALLY alone to confront those ultimate issues of life and death and eternity. It is in the desert places of our lives that God meets us and says, “You are my child and I love you with an everlasting love. NOTHING shall ever separate you from either my presence or my love”; it is in the wilderness areas that we can hear God speak, “Your sins are forgiven; therefore go and sin no more.” The wilderness has always been the place where nothing stands between ourselves and God, the place we must go to escape all the clamor and distraction that for too long has helped us hide FROM ourselves and God so we might focus entirely ON God. If we’re TRULY honest with ourselves, Christmas is the one time of the year when we MOST need reality, MOST need to confront those empty places deep within us, MOST need to repent and find forgiveness so that with the beginning of the coming new year, we might welcome it with new personal LIVES. This IS not

and never WILL be a popular Christmas story, but if we travel there, if we're not afraid of what we will discover about ourselves in the wilderness to hear John's promising message of repentance and forgiveness, we just might find that it speaks to us every bit as powerfully as that babe wrapped in swaddling cloth, lying in a manger. Let us pray...

*Heavenly Father, as much as we love to hear the story of Jesus's humble birth in a manger surrounded by the Holy Family and singing angels and smiling animals and a corps of visiting Magi, we have to honestly confess that we love it ESPECIALLY BECAUSE it IS such a "feel-good story"- one that makes us forget so much of the hurt and problems and anxiety of the present time. We would prefer to have our Lord come to us as in a Hallmark movie where beautiful people find themselves in harmless situations and everything turns out all right in the end.*

*But the sad truth is that we know that that's not how Jesus first came to us. He was rejected from the moment he entered our world and from that time on, we NEVER STOPPED trying to kill him, NEVER STOPPED trying to keep him from fulfilling his God-given destiny. And yet because he WAS real and because he DID struggle against all the sin and death that was arrayed against him, eventually CONQUERING it, we know he is able to confront all the sin and death in our OWN lives and conquer that AS WELL. Help us to keep Jesus and the message of his saving grace REAL for only a REAL Christ can help us through all the REAL struggles that go on in our lives and in our world. In his name we pray. Amen.*