

“Afflicting the Comfortable.”

Isaiah 40: 1-11, Mark 1:1-8

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You can pick your friends, but you can't pick your relatives. As my kids would say “true that!” I guess that's youth speak for Amen! As you prepare for a season of brotherly visiting and familial giving, you might find yourself reflecting on your family of origin. Some memories might make you smile, others might make you cringe. I have fond memories of trips to grandma's house, decorating the tree, baking sugar cookies and cuddling up in her lap. You might remember with a snicker how Grandpa would sit in his recliner unaffected by the whirlwind swirling around him. Relatives can be a strange bunch, but ultimately they are your strange bunch. I wonder what stories Jesus might have told about his weird cousin John.

John is the main attraction in the beginning of Mark's gospel. He helps us prepare in a different way. We do not hear of angel visitations or a child's leaping in his mother's womb. There are no shepherds, mangers or wise men here. In fact, Mark springs us forward thirty years to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He boldly declares, this is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Before Jesus even shows up, Mark proclaims that what we are about to hear is Good News. Then we meet cousin John, the Baptizer, the one who has been sent to prepare a way for Jesus.

Some one once said, “preparing is one of the most important parts of Christmas.” In our society that preparation can take many forms, most of which have little to do with our spiritual lives. This year Thanksgiving dinner seemed like nothing more than a chance to fill one's tank before a long night of shopping. “Quick! Clear the dishes and put out the pie so I can get in line at the Best Buy!” That is not the kind of preparation John is talking about.

Mark tells us John is the One who will point the way to the Messiah, the one who prepares the people for his ministry. Isaiah spoke of the one to prepare the people several hundred years earlier. John came to fulfill this prophesy, to be the One to lead God's people to the long anticipated Savior. One preacher says John “was the prophetic hinge connecting the past and the future by what he did in the present. This was a man of God who knew his place.”

In the secular time between Thanksgiving and Christmas we spend a lot of time preparing. John does not prepare with trees or lights or cookies. It is not about asking *for* but sharing *with*. John prepares the people to welcome the Holy One into their midst, not as a sweet infant but a grown adult who comes to change the way we see the world. John's power is nothing like what they will experience with Jesus. John is merely the opening act.

John understood he was to point the way to the One in whom God had chosen to take on flesh. In fact, John was overcome by a great sense of humility. He was not worthy to untie the sandal of the One who was to come. John told the people his was a baptism for the repentance of sins. He baptized with water. Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Then as now, people were searching for something to fulfill their spiritual hungers. They longed to know the One of whom the prophets of old had spoken, the one who would come to speak for the speechless and stand with the those whom others had forgotten. Could this Jesus be the One? When Jesus steps up to begin his ministry, John steps back. There was no trace of jealousy, no envy. He knew his place; he was not the way—he was to prepare the way.

John's message was clear: repent and change. The future will be different, it will not be business as usual, the old ways will give way to new ways. In order to be part of this movement, you must take a critical look at your life and change your foolish ways. We hear the Isaiah passage for this morning and find it very familiar not because we are Biblical scholars but perhaps because we are lovers of Handel's *Messiah*. In the same way, the words of John the Baptist take me back to the music of *Godspell*. I can hear John the Baptist singing from the back of the church "Prepare ye the way of the Lord" and then the entire cast comes streaming forward, dancing down the aisles, inviting the audience to be part of the celebration. I remember trying to be sultry and seductive at the age of sixteen singing "Turn back, Old Man, forswear thy foolish ways." Some times the messages we learn in music stay with us longer than they do from hours of thoughtful biblical study.

If John was such a bizarre character, what made his message so attractive? What made people willing to submit to his baptism, to undertake a process of repentance? First those seekers were like many of us. Most of them would have said they believed in God. Perhaps they were religious but not spiritual Many were faithful participants in their religious communities. They were drawn to John's message because they were curious, they hungered for more, they were spiritual seekers. Something he said struck at the core of their souls. "*The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thongs of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit*" They had no idea what John was talking about, but they wanted to know more.

By all accounts John was a religious man, faithful to his call. If he was not worthy of untying this man's sandals, where does that leave us? John teaches us that humility is a defining characteristic of discipleship. John fulfilled the role God placed before him. We do not always recognize God's intentions for us as clearly as John did, nor do we submit to God's plan as easily. What keeps us from seeing more clearly and following more nearly? (Ah, there is that *Godspell* again.) One of the ways we can prepare to receive Christ in this season of Advent, is to take a serious inventory of our life. We may not have to literally demolish mountains to make a way for Jesus, but we can work to remove those spiritual and emotional obstacles that seem as difficult to overcome. How can we

work with God to make our spiritual path unobstructed? What can we change, what attitudes can we dismantle, what old wound continues to be a barrier?

John declares “Prepare the way of the Lord!” It would be wonderful if we spent as much time preparing our spiritual house as we did our physical house. It would make such a difference if we cleared out the junk and made room not for a tree to dwell in our midst, but the Holy One to dwell. As we prepare to welcome company into our homes we can also prepare a way for the Christ. Take a moment to reflect critically on your life, what are your priorities, what gets your attention, what happens when you do not attend to this stuff? Spending quiet, uninterrupted time in prayer or silence may help you clear away that space for the Holy One to come.

Tomorrow night I invite you to join me in a ritual of preparation. God introduces us to many paths of renewal. Walking the labyrinth is one tool. Many of you walk and share that this is your time with God. Amen. First we will become better acquainted with this ancient meditative tool. Then in the candlelit Social Hall we will follow a pathway that leads us to the heart of God. There we will wait, as long as it feels right, to receive a word or vision that will help us prepare our inner space for Jesus. I hope some of you will be able to join us and experience this inward journey. Finding the time to attend to your spiritual well being this season will be a way to clear out the debris that makes the journey more difficult to traverse. One preacher lamented, “it should not be an ‘uphill battle’ for Christ to gain entrance into our lives.”

That is the work John calls us to do; to declutter the highways of our lives so that Jesus can make his way in. If you took a look at the list of all you hope to accomplish this coming week, where would you find Jesus? You are likely to find him ringing a bell outside of Stop and Shop. You might find him on the Gift of Giving Tree. You might even find him knocking at your office door telling you in how the chemo is doing its work (despite the hair loss), how the doctors offer you new signs of hope and sharing a healing embrace. Crazy cousin John calls us to prepare a way for Jesus to enter our lives. This is the work of Advent. May we make a way for it to be so? Amen

Sources:

“The Actions of Christmas: Preparing,” Sermonhelp.com, December 5, 1999.

Rev. Dr. Elton Richards, “The Future...It’s Coming,” Day 1.org, December 8, 1996.