



"A More Promising Direction"
Scripture – Mark 1:1-8
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, December 6, 2020

Camilla and I are watching the fourth season of "The Crown," as some of you may be. We resisted the urge to binge-watch all 10 episodes. We have seen the first seven installments and this season has been especially brutal on the royal family. They are portrayed as arrogant, out of touch, unkind, and entitled. If the Netflix production is even close to being on target, it must leave the Queen's family wishing they could turn back the clock and have a second chance to relive those days with a good deal more grace and humanity.

Each of us carries regrets about mistakes we have made. We wish we could grab our remote, hit "rewind" and live a few of our own past episodes differently. Some of us regret how we treated our parents or a sibling. Some lament mistakes we made with our children. Some kick themselves for pursuing values that have left them empty. Some chastise themselves for how insensitive they were to someone in pain. But, punishing ourselves for mistakes made long ago is of little value and could even be harmful to our mental health. Unless. Unless we learn from our mistakes and harness their power to motivate us to pursue virtue and wisdom.

Enter John the Baptist. This brash prophet warns us to take stock of who we are and where we are heading.

The Gospel of Mark introduces John the Baptist by stating that he "appeared in the wilderness" and provides us with a mental image of an unconventional man who was "clothed in camel's hair and who ate locusts and wild honey." Artists often portray him as a towering figure with a head of hair that never met a barber or a brush.

If the word "wilderness" evokes scenes of forests and lush vegetation, think again. John lived in a sweltering, arid, and rocky land that can only be described as barren. Some of us have spent time in this harsh, arid land and in Qumran where John lived with the Essenes – the scribes of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

However, Mark uses the word "wilderness" in a double sense. On the one hand, it represents the physical region John inhabited. More than that, the wilderness represents the place where there is less order and more chaos, where there are threats, where we are on alert for dangers, where life is less predictable. The past nine months we have been living in a wilderness set off by a global pandemic that has twisted our normal patterns and cast us into unpredictable territory.

Today's text says that "John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John says, "Repent!" and many picture him as a fire and brimstone preacher intent on frightening people by threatening them with eternal punishment.

Many times in the past, I heard John the Baptist issuing a guilty verdict on us because of our screw-ups. I imagined a fiery prophet threatening us to get with God's program or suffer the consequences. Empathy was clearly not one of his spiritual gifts.

But, I wonder. Did John find satisfaction in making people feel horrible or was he pointing them in a more promising direction? Was John begging people to fall on their knees and call themselves worthless wretches or was he encouraging people to become the person God had created them to become?

A mild, soft-spoken person cannot always persuade us to correct our course. Sometimes it takes a wild, exaggerated character to grab our attention and steer us toward a more satisfying existence.

If the prophet appeared today, I doubt his message would include the word "repent" because this word has become encumbered with far too much baggage. Many imagine that the word repent means to think poorly of oneself because we have been judged and found wanting.

When I hear the word "repent" my defense mechanisms kick into high gear. I contrast myself with people who lie and betray and focus only on themselves, and I argue that compared to them I'm practically a saint. The end result is that I convince myself that I am fine just the way I am and I need not consider ways I could benefit from a course correction.

In the Scriptures, we find two major meanings of the word "repentance." In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word often means to turn and go in a different direction. It derives from the experience of nomadic people. As they travel across the arid wilderness, "they reach a point of repentance. This is the place beyond which they will perish if they do not have adequate supplies of food and water to complete their journey. The point of repentance is where they check their supplies. If they have a sufficient amount, they proceed. However, if not, they head in a new direction where they can find fresh supplies. To repent is to change your trajectory toward life."¹

In the New Testament, the Greek word for repentance is similar. It is not remorse. It places the accent on going beyond your current way of thinking. It is what the Apostle Paul meant when he said, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Repentance means to see things "in a new way – not the way shaped by the values of society, but the way shaped by the wisdom of Jesus."²

John the Baptist was not simply a judgmental crank. He was counseling the people to jettison their poisonous habits and to adopt healthy ones. John was encouraging people to say to themselves and to God: "I will make better choices going forward. I will become a person of courage and good cheer, an honest and dependable person, a healer and spreader of blessings."

John the Baptist was not an unhinged prophet of doom who elevated his ego by condemning others. Rather, he thought it was in the people's best interest to provoke a crisis in their lives. Like someone who one day faced his warts and realized it was time for a makeover, John the Baptist pushed people to make an honest assessment of their lives. He cajoled them to climb out of their dead-end habits by promising a more satisfying identity; an identity in which they could form a partnership with God in rebuilding and revitalizing their lives.

Why is that so difficult for us? John O'Donohue writes: "So often we look back on our patterns of behavior or on the kind of decisions we make repeatedly and yet which always fail to serve us well, and we aim for a new and more successful way of living. But *change* is difficult for us. We usually opt to continue the old pattern rather

than risk the danger of something new and different...At any time, you can ask yourself: What is preventing me from crossing my next threshold? What gift would enable me to do it?"

"At every threshold a complexity of emotions come alive: confusion, fear, excitement, sadness, hope. It is wise in your own life to listen inwards with complete attention until you hear the inner voice calling you forward."

"To acknowledge and cross a new threshold is always a challenge. It demands courage and also a sense of trust in whatever is emerging... (such trust can) open up our lives to become voyages of discovery, creativity and compassion. No threshold need be a threat, but rather an invitation and a promise."³

Author Kathleen Norris tells of teaching in a parochial school and using the Psalms to encourage the children to express themselves. These children know what it's like to be small, lost and abandoned. One little boy wrote a poem he called "The Monster Who Was Sorry." He "began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him; his response in the poem is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes: 'Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself: I shouldn't have done all that.'"

Norris writes, "If that boy had been a novice in the fourth-century monastic desert his elders might have told him that he was well on the way toward repentance, not such a monster after all, but only human. If the house is messy, they might have said, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?"⁴

Look again at the opening line in Mark's gospel. He does not say, "Here's the bad news: before Jesus comes onto the scene, we have to hear from John the Baptist who declares 'There's hell to pay for the way you have been living!'"

Instead, the gospel writer says that John the Baptist is the beginning of the *good news*. We tend to think of John as the one who shows up at the party at the height of its euphoria and shouts, "Party's over!" But John's intention is not to squash revelry; his purpose is to warn us not to miss opportunities.

God constantly presents us with new possibilities and urges us to become partners in transforming our hurting world. God calls us to step into the voids where compassion is needed, where justice is lacking and where peace is merely a distant dream. God challenges us to explore new visions and to embark on bold, perhaps radical, adventures that will make our lives and the lives of others richer, more satisfying and more joyful.

John the Baptist prods us by asking: What in the world are you waiting for?

NOTES

1. Mark E. Diehl, "The Unwelcome Advent Guest," December 8, 2013.
2. Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power - And How They Can Be Restored*, (New York: HarperOne, 2011), p. 179.
3. John O'Donohue, *Benedictus: A Book of Blessings*, (London: Bantam Press, 2007), p. 65-67.
4. Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 69-70. Thanks to the Reverend Amy Miracle for reminding me of this story.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Calling God —

Long ago, you spoke to wild, watery chaos
saying, "Let there be light."
And light dawned ...
illuminating a world
that had only known darkness.

Today we hear you speaking again —
this time through the call of your prophet ...
That lone, wild voice echoes across time and space:
*Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.*
And we are reminded that soon, soon
your light will dawn once again.

As we wait for the light that shines in the darkness —
the light no darkness can overcome —
we listen for your voice here and now.
We long for you to speak into *this* chaos —
to bring order to a dis-ordered world
turned upside down by an untamed virus
that is destroying lives and livelihoods.

We long for your voice to carry across the wilderness,
proclaiming a message of hope
to all who find themselves
in wastelands of despair, or in parched places
where only grief grows.

As we look ahead to a long, dark winter,
we long for you to call forth life,
to awaken us to your presence,
to assure us that you are drawing near.

We long for you to speak, O God.
For — when you speak —
light dawns, shadows fade, lives are transformed.

Holy God, as we watch and wait,
we pray that you would prepare our hearts
to receive the Light of the World.

Pour out your Spirit upon us
and baptize us with your grace
that we might be ready

to respond to John's call:

Prepare the way.

Prepare the way.

Renew our minds and transform our hearts;
help us abandon wayward wanderings
and return to faithful paths
that we might make straight a highway for our God.

During these Advent days,
open our ears to hear whispers
of glad tidings still to come;
fix our eyes upon the horizon,
to watch for the dawn of your new day;
and stir within us the confidence of hope
that we may be ready
to welcome the Prince of Peace.

This we pray in the name
of the One who comes,
the One who gave us words to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.