

The Voice in the Wilderness  
Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8  
First Presbyterian Church  
December 10, 2017  
Second Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11

<sup>4</sup>Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. <sup>2</sup>Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

<sup>3</sup>A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup>Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. <sup>5</sup>Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." <sup>6</sup>A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. <sup>7</sup>The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. <sup>8</sup>The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

<sup>9</sup>Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" <sup>10</sup>See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. <sup>11</sup>He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Mark 1:1-8

<sup>1</sup>The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

<sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;

<sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight,'"

<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after

me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

## Sermon

Mark’s gospel does not begin with an angel whispering in Mary’s ear. There are no shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night... and no wise men from the east following a star. Mark either did not know about these events or else he did not care. For him... the good news of Jesus Christ begins in the wilderness of Judea... with an old-timey prophet named John. John was the first real prophet to show up in Israel in a very long time.

Barbara Brown Taylor imagines that if Mark’s gospel were a movie, it could begin with a long pan shot of the desert east of Jerusalem... with row upon row of buckskin colored hills with nothing on them but rock and sand and silence. In the distance a Bedouin shepherd dressed in black leads his sheep up one of the hills, and as they disappear over the other side of it the title appears on the screen – just the way we heard it a moment ago: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” It’s a long title, but it fits because there’s plenty of room with all that desert.

Then you hear a man’s voiceover as the camera continues to scan the hills: “As is it written in the prophet Isaiah,” the voice says. ““See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way.”” Just then people appear on the screen walking toward something you cannot see. As you watch, they come to the edge of a large crowd and push into it to get a better view of what is going on.

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness,” the man goes on. “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” And just then the camera breaks through the crowd to show you a strange-looking figure standing knee-deep in the Jordan River with a soaking wet person shivering beside him. He doesn’t look like anyone else around him – dressed in camel’s hair with a leather belt, the exact same outfit Elijah wore 800 years before him. His hair and beard look like they’ve never been cut and he’s as skinny as a cactus. Those of us watching the movie may not know what’s going on, but those standing around him certainly did. The man was a prophet... a messenger – predicted by Isaiah – dressed like Elijah – and sent by God so say and do something important.<sup>1</sup>

I don’t know about you, but in the past, I have assumed that John was always in the wilderness... that he was just one of those rough-hewn, outdoorsy guys who happened to enjoy the taste of locust mixed with wild honey. But this week I began to wonder if perhaps John started his preaching NOT in the wilderness, but in the city... in Jerusalem... where the temple and rabbis and government officials and doctors and lawyers and merchants were... folks who were accomplished in their field and had positions of respect and power.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon “Wherever the Way May Lead” published in *Home By Another Way* (Cowley-1999), p.10-11.

I wonder if John started his preaching there... but soon found that no one came to listen... that no one seemed to have need of a baptism of repentance... that no one was interested in changing their life... that no one wanted to hear any critique of their world as it was. It's possible that John first started preaching in Jerusalem, but no one was able to hear and act on his words because their lives and their world seemed just fine as they were.<sup>2</sup>

So rather than preach to himself, John planted himself in the wilderness... out in the middle of nowhere... so that anyone who wanted to hear what he had to say would have to borrow the neighbor's donkey and put together enough water and provisions for the journey and risk being attacked by bandits and wild beasts along the way. Which begs the question why anybody would go to that much trouble – especially someone from Jerusalem. I mean, Jerusalem was where the temple was... and the rabbis... and all the accumulated wisdom of the religious establishment. If somebody wanted to hear from God, why not stay there? Go to a few extra services? Make an appointment to see the chief priest? It doesn't make any sense: why would anybody in Jerusalem go out to the wilderness? unless... unless you were looking for something else – something that the temple and the rabbis either could not or would not supply?<sup>3</sup>

You know, I wonder if that's what is happening in our day. People still seem to be spiritually curious... they still seem to be looking for something authentic to live for... and even as technology slowly consumes more of our lives people still seem to want community. But the fact is that fewer and fewer of them are turning to the church and people like you and me to find it. Back in Jerusalem we know that the Holy Spirit had gotten all but covered up with the pretend piety and temple taxes and priestly hocus-pocus. The flame of the Holy Spirit was all but snuffed out ... so God moved it out into the wilderness... out to where the most socially unacceptable character was having himself a little tent revival. Dressed in animal hair with piece of tanned hide around his waist... his breath heavy with locusts and wild honey... John proclaimed that someone was coming. He didn't know all the details... he didn't even know the name or what he looked like... but he knew that the old world was about to end, and a new world was coming toward him... carried in the arms of God's chosen one. And... he said... this someone is SO spectacular that it's not good enough to just wait around twiddling your thumbs. No, you need to get ready... to prepare the way so that when he comes he can walk a straight and level path right into your doors. That was the good news John was the beginning of. He was the messenger... sent to point to the one who was coming and apparently the message lit him up like a flashing neon sign... so that people were drawn to him. They were drawn to him – this man who was from another planet – they came out from the hills and the city and here's why – because what he offered them was something every single one of us needs from time to time: the PROMISE that God is doing something more than we can see with our eyes... the HOPE that we can be more than we have been or are right now... and as we get ready for what God is going to do, we have a chance to hear the hard truth about ourselves... and to come clean... a chance to stop pretending we are someone else and start over fresh.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Foster Connors in his sermon "A Harsh Voice of Comfort" found on A Sermon for Every Sunday: <http://asermonforeverysunday.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Taylor again, p. 12

And did you hear? They even allowed him to wash them off... They let him give them a little bath. No Book of Order instructions as to how it was supposed to be done... the rabbis had not okayed it... it was just something John offered those who came to him: repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Well, you know what strikes me about all this... this messenger and his message? It's that he was nowhere near a church... not a church building in sight! And that those who insisted on staying inside the church never heard his message. It was only those who were willing to go out into the wilderness who got to turn around and get washed off and hear the news that a Savior was coming.

So, here's the message I'm taking away from John's annual Advent appearance to us: You and I are church people. We love our church... we hear God speaking here... we experience God nestled in the bosom of this community – we are church people. Here we know what to expect... we know what we're going to get... we are comfortable here. So why should we hunt for God anywhere else... least of all out in some wilderness?

Here's why: there will be voices we cannot hear from inside these walls – voices that will call us to look hard at ourselves... voices that will call us to recognize when we get off track and need to turn around... voices that will call us to change from the inside out... voices that we will miss if we only listen for God in church. If we only listen for God in the church, we will miss half the message.<sup>4</sup> Because the good news is always beginning somewhere in the world... for those who have ears to hear and hearts open to receive it.

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<sup>4</sup> Taylor, p.14.