

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
December 4, 2011  
Rev. Diana Hartman  
Worship Theme: How God Prepares the Way  
Mark 1:1-8

Perhaps some of you are familiar with these words from an old 60's tune, "Has anybody here seen my old friend John? Oh, won't you tell me where he's gone? Cause he freed a lot of people but they say that the good die young. And I just looked around and he was gone." The late John F. Kennedy was the subject of those lyrics, but I wonder if during this Advent season we might ask the same of John the baptizer. Where is our friend John? If we believe Mark's gospel, we had better find him. Mark thought highly enough of ole' John to open a gospel with him. Mark, in fact, is the only one of the four gospel writers to even use the word gospel, that is, good news, and John the baptizer is Mark's opening good news messenger. Yes, on our journey to Bethlehem this Advent, we had better track down John and listen to his stinging good news.

This time of year our Nation is kicking Christmas into high gear. The church maintains that Christmas is but a glimmer on the horizon, a promise foretold, a hope longed for, that for which our hearts ache. Not so for the gods of profit margin and product control. Awash in their religiosity, manger scenes sit on many mantles. The trees are up, or will go up soon. We are bathed in a forest of lights, sales, parties, and Christmas cards. Shoppers have become violent, angry mobs as they compete for merchandise. In this frenzy of Christmas preparation, John is nowhere to be found. We won't find him on Christmas Cards, sporting his camel hair cloak, sandals and leather belt wailing a message of repentance. We won't find John rushing about in the city center. Oh, plenty of Christmas characters will make a home there, through no choosing of their own. Angels, wise men, and shepherds are easily found where the action is. Such characters are rather friendly and marketable. They connote a Jesus whose cousins might have been well-to-do temple elites, merchants, or even Jerusalem politicians, rather than a hairy fire and brimstone preacher, whose breath reeks of locust and honey. The primary product John uses to deliver his wilderness good news—repentance—doesn't sell well in the days before Christmas, not at Frontier Mall, and not in First Presbyterian Church.

The Bible reminds us that the prophets of God have never felt comfortable in established places. Large, bustling, noisy cities don't do well in confrontation with camel haired preachers like John. It's no wonder then that John did his preaching out in the wilderness, away from established, rock-solid mainline Jerusalem, out where he would attract people who were longing for something much deeper than Jerusalem had to offer, people who wanted to change direction in life, who were willing to be dunked in the dangerous waters of the Jordan River. John is odd. He's not well groomed, and the virtue of repentance is a hard sell to good folks like us. It's no wonder modern day marketers of Christmas merchandise don't put John on Christmas cards or coffee mugs. Most folks would prefer to let John's cup pass. We might expect John's audience to be desert lizards, rocks and sand.

John, however, refuses to go away. He bellows from the margins into our fast-paced lives, determined to have our attention. From the wilderness, John calls, waiting to ambush us, his husky voice booming down the halls of history, pointing a scraggly finger our way. John has often been painted in Christian art as a fire and brimstone preacher, calling down God's wrath on sinful humanity with a rigid finger and pounding fist. But maybe it's the other way around. Rather than pointing with his boney finger, maybe John is motioning to us, and rather than pounding his fist, perhaps he is waving us over. Perhaps John knows what we in the mainstream of early December holiday life don't know. Our lives aren't as clean as we think they are. We aren't as good as we would like others to believe. We need to join John for a cold bath of Jordan River reality,

to wash away our pretensions, to remind us that Jesus came into the world to save sinners, sinners like us, and John isn't going to let us forget it. God's difficult way of salvation won't be discovered in the business of our daily lives, in the center of things, in downtown Cheyenne, Denver, or even Jerusalem. God's way is being prepared out in the wilderness, and we had better follow.

Amazingly, Mark tells us, the people came. Whether it was John's passionate proclamation or a hope for something deeper than their same old ho-hum existence, Mark says they came to the wilderness. Along the highways and byways of the countryside and Jerusalem, they came to hear the good news of God's new way.

Preparing for wilderness travel is hard work. It involves anticipating what might happen out there in the wild and the prepping for it. Twice in my life I have been outfitted for a seven day backpacking journey into the San Juan Wilderness area in Colorado. Both times I had to make decisions about what I needed in my pack for survival. We had to anticipate the weather and other trail conditions. If I didn't take what I needed there would be serious consequences and if I packed too much, every step would be an unbearable burden that could affect my ability to complete the journey.

Anticipation and preparation are the keys to wilderness survival. Wilderness existence involves some pretty radical changes. In the wilderness I can't live my normal life. No beds to sleep in or bathrooms, no stores from which to buy dinner, only my own two legs for transportation. No cell phones to call for help. I relied only on God and the other hikers. How appropriate then that John's sermon is on repentance, quite literally, turning my life around, living in a different way, a more honest way, a more hopeful way. The wilderness way is treacherous and only the essential will find space. It's about survival, life and death, sin and grace, and Advent is the same way. Food and water, a guide who knows the path, and the faith to follow, that's about it. Wilderness life is bare bones, trimmed down, like John who only has sandals, camel hair, and good news to tell.

I think God likes it like that. Leave the bling, glitz and glamour to the advertising executives. The Advent way of this God will be about the basics, the essentials, our sin and need for Christmas grace. It could be this strange, passionate, preacher John and his eccentric pulpit is the only way that God can get through to us during Advent. Sermons on repentance may fall on deaf ears in the city, surrounded by the usual trappings of life. Out in the wilderness, however, when so much of life has to be left behind, the message doesn't have as many barriers to dig through. We can't haul all the usual stuff out into the desert to hear John proclaim God's new way. The wise men had the same problem in their own travels to see the Christ-child; they had to leave their old lives behind and take only what was important with them. When they encountered Mary's boy in that little crossroads called Bethlehem surrounded by Judean wilderness, they went home changed, different, traveling by another path.

In Ann Tyler's novel *Saint Maybe*, the main character, Ian Bedloe, feels he has caused his brother's death. Overcome by grief, he cannot sleep and this living nightmare consumes all his waking hours. Tyler writes:

It was after seven on a dismal January evening, and most places had closed. One window, though, glowed yellow—a wide expanse of plate glass with CHURCH OF THE SECOND CHANCE arching across it in block letters. Ian couldn't see inside because the paper shade was lowered. He walked on by. Behind him a hymn began...He missed most of the words, but the voices were strong and joyful...He

paused at the intersection, the arches of his sneakers teetering on the curb. He peered at the DON'T WALK sign for a moment. Then he turned and headed back to the church.<sup>1</sup>

John says, "Repent". Why? Because in Jesus, God makes it possible to repent. Ian, you and I can start again and then again; our sinfulness does not finally get the best of us. That's the gospel, the good news, the glad tidings toward which John invites us to stop, turn and hold onto for dear life. Things do not have to stay the way they are. In fact, to follow Jesus means that things cannot stay the way they are.

If you want to prepare for Christmas this year, limit your time in the shopping malls, get your nose out of the Christmas cards, leave all the stuff of mainstream life behind and set your sights on the wilderness, the wilderness of our broken world, the wilderness of broken dreams, the wilderness of your own soul that can only be filled by the Christ-child's grace. After all, Jesus didn't come to the fast moving lanes of Jerusalem, at least not at first. He came to a broken-down out of the way sort of place six miles south; where there were no maps, no street signs, only the light of a star to give direction in the dark night. If we are going to find God this Advent season, we have to get away from the crowds, get away from our old lives, and go someplace off in the wilderness. It won't be easy. Such a path calls for repentance, turning away from an old life, and embracing a new one. Where is our good friend John? He's in the wilderness this Advent season, preparing for the Lord's birth, and he's calling for you and me to join him. Will you turn around and follow him into the wilderness?

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Tyler, *Saint Maybe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 115.