

December 10, 2017
Then What?
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Mark 1:1-8

[The Proclamation of John the Baptist]

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ 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. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

“At peace without spot or blemish” is Bible talk for being ready. *Prepare!* is the word in Mark’s gospel. He’s quoting Malachi and Isaiah here at the very beginning, as he sets out to tell his tale – *the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God*; his book title, if you will. Mark wants his story set in the context of biblical prophecy, in the voice of a wild man named John who promises that the one coming after him is going to change positively everything.

Don’t you wonder what folks thought, watching and listening to John? That if this camel-hair-wearing, locust-eating nut job was the warm-up act, what in the world was the real guy going to be like? Tom Hanks is how I picture John the Baptist now, ever since the movie Cast Away came out. John the Baptist is a zealot, fundamentalist, religious extremist nut job. And those guys always make me feel itchy to run the other way.

But here he is in the lectionary for today, so we are stuck with each other – which is good, I think, given how easy it is for people like us never to listen to people with whom we disagree about anything. John has a strange reputation. Kids like him for the funny clothes and bug eating. Grown-ups – his political activity is bothersome to people. I wish he’d not been



killed so early in the story, yet we know full well that the story of John the Baptizer is the gospel of Jesus Christ collapsed into two dozen verses spread across the gospels.

He came. He preached the good news of God: *you belong to God; from the richest to the poorest, the most powerful king to the weakest slave, God made you, God loves you, God is with you in life and in death; your life matters to God and you are not beholden to the Empires of this world – for anything.*

The brokers of the Empire immediately recognized this message for the clear and present danger it was – to their power, to their profits, and to the social order which they were charged to keep. When they couldn't moderate the message to their liking, they muzzled the messengers outright. They killed these prophets – *just like you've always done*, Jesus himself will tell the Empire brokers later. To no good end for the Empire. Because the good news that John and all those prophets preached would not die.

John was an Essene. Essene is a word like *Pharisee* or *Sadducee* – the name of a first-century Jewish sect. Extremely religious, all men. They liked to take baths – lots and lots of ritual baths. More religious than the religious Jews in Jerusalem at the time – at least they thought so. Confident the leadership of Israel, including mainstream Judaism, was in collusion with the empire of their time, the Roman Empire. Their only faithful option was to keep themselves apart, to keep themselves undefiled – to segregate themselves. To be faithful, they lived apart and lived ascetically. You know *ascetic* – extreme self-denial. Thus the clothes of camel hair and the locust-for-lunch diet.

John preached what his Essene fathers and brothers preached: *the Lord is coming; it behooves his people to be ready*. Which is why we read him at Advent, when the church is all about *getting ready*, about resetting our lives and our life together, back to our baptismal factory settings, don't you know. *Jesus came and lived and died and rose. We are at the living part right now. We are going to die and rise. Let's reorganize everything we think and do around that truth. Being ready. Ready to live in a world changed by the coming of God. Repentance is the activity of getting ready.*

John's life's work was preaching – calling people to repentance, to want this change that makes us ready to live in a world transformed by the presence of God. John's love of God drove his faith, his preaching, his politics. They are not separate parts of himself, but all one thing. His love of God drove him. It took him places his religious affiliation or his politics might otherwise forbid him to go. Essenes never went to Jerusalem, believing the Temple too corrupted. They sent offerings but never went to sacrifice. Yet John will eventually find himself there.

In his life and his death, John – the warm-up act to the Christ event – testifies that the systems which drive the misery and suffering of this world may have great power, but they do not have the most. And they do not have the last word about life and death. In his

life and in his death, like Christ, John bears witness to the possibility of being at peace in this hateful world. The possibility of being victim to it, without being broken and used up by its filth and its corruption – its “vices and voodoo,” as Kate Campbell sings.

And it's by John's preaching that we first hear of such possibility in the gospels. *I can't save you*, he says, *but I can get you ready for the one who can. You must repent.* And the Bible says folks heard him and went down to be baptized. So if we can listen to John, and if we choose the baptism of repentance, then what? Because I expect this is where most of us land in the story. Then what?

Because it's one thing to change, right? It's something altogether else to stay changed. I'm awesome at not eating sugar FOR ONE DAY! Wedding days are awesome days to be married – it's practically easy that day. People hand you money and presents on your wedding day, just for being married. They hardly ever do that when you've been married 29 years and you have a mortgage and two tuitions to pay. To choose this life daily – or hourly! – for as long as one has breath, that is an entirely different project.

Once at my mother's house she told Mariah to go brush her teeth. Mariah said cheerfully, "Oh Mamaw, it's okay. I never brush my teeth on vacation." Would be nice, right? Take a vacation from the call of Christ? But would it? Because without it, friends, how would we live? We pick up this faith again and again because without it, I don't know how to move through this world. With this faith, I feel like I'm crazy half the time. Without it, I think I'd just be lost.

The hardest part of the John story is its brevity, and not just in the book of Mark. He dies before Jesus has hardly started. Remember why? He got thrown in jail for criticizing the king of Israel for, amazingly, sexual misconduct. Doesn't it just make you want to put your head down and weep?

Anyway – the king had him in jail. This king ruled a country, but had no control over his own house. Doesn't it just make you want to put your head down and weep? His step-daughter dared her mom to ask the king for John's head on a platter, so she did it – just to see, I suppose, who really ran the kingdom. And they killed him. The way he died embarrasses me, sort of. I want our heroes to be more...**heroic** than that. I want them to die grandly. Never succumbing to pain. Crying, “Freedooooommm!” to the very end.

But this isn't a movie. There's no script. There is only faith in the promise and presence of Christ which saves us, eventually. And sustains us now. We don't choose very much at all, other than to follow Jesus and be His hands and feet and voice and bank account here and now. But we don't choose our deaths. We choose Jesus, and whatever life his love of us and our love of him brings our way. *Jesus came and lived and died and rose. We are at the living part right now. We are going to die and rise.* Now is the season when we order everything we think and do around that truth. Would you pray with me?