

## ***Chestnuts and Locusts***

A Sermon Preached by the  
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
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Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

Well wouldn't you know it? Here we are, finally getting into the Christmas spirit, baking cookies, decorating the tree, "chestnuts roasting by an open fire" and all that, and here comes that locust-munching misfit, John the Baptist, preaching fire and brimstone. Honestly, don't you just want to say, "Who invited him?" You know he's never going to drink a cup of eggnog and join the carol singing. Hallmark has never had him on a greeting card, and you'll probably never find him in a Christmas pageant – at least I don't think so, I guess we'll find out next week!

We're just three weeks from Christmas, "yuletide carols being sung by the choir" at the Holidazzle Parade last night, probably some gifts already under the tree, stockings hung by the chimney with care, so it's with some understandable irritation that we look up and see John the Baptist coming our way.

But that's Advent, you remember – the season filled with jarring juxtapositions of peace and love next to the sun and moon and stars falling out of the sky; the season of strange visions and prophecy, of sensible people turned into silence by the appearance of an angel. And, of course, our annual stand against the darkness with thousands upon millions of lighted nativity scenes on front lawns, in odd competition with flying reindeer, elves and Santa Clauses.

That's Advent, and the Good News, the Gospel, always begins with a messenger, whether it's a single angel whispering in Mary's ear or multitudes of the heavenly hosts hovering over shepherds. Whether it's Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show or a strange, powerful figure emerging from the Judean wilderness, the Gospel is always carried by a messenger. Some of us pay attention, some of us don't; and some of us believe in angels and prophets, and some of us don't. But wherever we come down on that one, we cannot refute the fact that the Good News comes to us one to another, one voice to one ear, God's voice to our ears. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." So says Mark to our listening ears.

Last week the message was to keep awake, and it was indeed delivered in Mark's Gospel with enough sound and fury to arouse even the sleepest among us. Now that he's got our attention, the message is to prepare, to get ready for this amazing event that will come to pass. Again, the writer of Mark is not the least bit sentimental about it. Again, we get no angels, no shepherds, no cozy manger with comforting animal sounds. We have no star to follow, no kings, no extravagant gifts, only the guidance of an eccentric, skinny, prickly bug-eating

prophet who proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. His message is not about a baby being born in a manger, but rather about the One who will come to save us; not about a king leading an army in triumph, but rather about the One who is coming in clouds, who is powerful enough to baptize with the Holy Spirit.

The messenger, with his strange clothes and even stranger eating habits, should have been enough to scare off any normal person. But John the Baptizer, who set up shop in the wilderness, seemed to be drawing crowds that the temple couldn't begin to match. He was a sure-fire, old-time prophet, the first one to show up in Israel in nearly three hundred years. And he was the genuine article, no doubt about that, right down to the camel's hair and leather belt, the locusts and wild honey. Someone has said it this way – "predicted by Isaiah, dressed like Elijah, sent by God." No wonder he was attracting attention.

If you could get past the diet of locusts and wild honey, you might have gotten a taste of what else he was offering. If you hung around the edge of the crowd, you would have seen people being dunked in the river, pulled up out of that rushing water, clean as a newborn baby. What seemed to make them cleaner still was their willingness to embrace a new life, life that would be transformed by the One that John was talking about, the One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. The dunking in the river was just the first step, a chance to come clean, to start over. It wasn't a ritual purification like the temple baths, in that it didn't come with rules and regulations about who was eligible to enter the temple and who wasn't. It was just a quick dip in cold water that tingled your body and jangled your soul. So when John said, "get ready, your life is about to change," you were underwater and out before you knew it, gasping for breath, dripping wet, staggering to shore. It was enough to waken a person up for a lifetime of expectation.

The prophet Isaiah wrote, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." John told his followers how to get ready, how to prepare, how to make the paths straight. His one word of instruction was fairly simple, "Repent," get it together, turn it around, say you're sorry and start over. Cartoon versions abound this time of year. You've seen them, I'm sure, hairy, bearded, barefooted characters carrying signs that read, "Repent, the end is near." One recent one had the same character carrying the sign that read, "The end is not near. Learn to cope." A more contemporary version of the message is on the bumper sticker that reads, "Jesus is coming. Look busy."

If we're going to look busy repenting, Webster's dictionary tells us that to repent (in religious usage) is "to feel so contrite over one's sins as to change, or decide to change, one's ways." The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia* and it means to "turn around." It is a turning around, a turning back to God. Someone recently sent me an e-mail of a church sign that read, "If you're headed the wrong direction, turn around. God allows U-turns." Probably the best part of that Good News is that it doesn't matter how many U-turns we have to make to finally get there!

Now one of the more interesting things about John and his mission was his choice of location. In real estate, location is everything. Obviously nobody

bothered to tell John the Baptist! He pitched his revival tent in the middle of the wilderness, about as far from civilization as one could get. He set up camp miles away from the temple at Jerusalem, the center of religious life, the place where God was thought to dwell.

The Judean wilderness is desolate and uninviting, really an unlikely environment for evangelism and revivalism. But people flocked to John's witness, traveling across rocky terrain, in desert conditions to be immersed in the waters of his baptism. The power of John's witness – both his personality and the truth of his message – was so overwhelming that people left the well-worn city streets, left what was familiar and comfortable, to seek out that solitary voice in the wilderness.

That's the thing about repentance: sometimes we have to travel into the wilderness to get turned around. We have to set aside what's familiar and comfortable and listen for that solitary voice in the wilderness that calls us back. That's what Advent is for. We begin that long and arduous journey back to Bethlehem, through unfamiliar territory, without much support, following the light from a star over a manger that's barely visible at this point. But we know it's there.

We all know where our own wilderness lies, that place we dare not venture because of what it will demand of us. It's much easier to avoid confrontation, to bury the hurt feelings, to ignore the pain. Most of us are good at that. And we can live with an incredible amount of discomfort before we decide it's time to go into that wilderness and find out why we continue to allow the pain or anger or frustration to dominate our lives. We don't want to face our fears, we don't want to deal with the grief, we don't want to be the one to speak up. But sometimes the only way to Bethlehem is through the wilderness. We have to name the fear, allow the grief and give voice to that which will set us free.

And even when we're brave enough to venture into the wilderness, we usually insist on having a map or a compass, something that will allow us to control our destination. We are reluctant to give up the driver's seat, when, in fact, what we probably need most is someone else to take over for a while and give us a rest from the exhausting task of negotiating unfamiliar territory. It's not an easy trip. There are too many rocks to stumble over, too many holes to fall into, too many unseen dangers. If we insist on being in control, we'll probably encounter them all.

There's a lot to be said for trust when you're traveling in the dark through a strange land. You have to trust that solitary voice or that star, whichever you can hear or see, to help you find the path. The late David Steele, a Presbyterian pastor who wrote often for *Presbyterian Outlook*, once told about traveling down the Grand Canyon on the back of a burro. Burros have been part of the Grand Canyon trek for years. Hundreds, probably thousands, of trips up and down the narrow, steep walls of the canyon and not a single accident. Maybe you've taken that trek. It would not be a vacation that I would choose; animals sense fear and my trusty burro would probably just stop and let me off at the top. Anyway, in this article, David Steele shared an interesting fact, which is that a burro's eyes are set in such a way that it can see all four of its feet, so it has no qualms about

traversing the very edges of the cliff, no fear of a misstep that would send it and its passenger flying over the edge. Sometimes you have to give up control.

Churches have a great fear of flying off the edge. That's probably why John set up shop as far away from the temple as he could get, so that people would take their eyes off the ground for a moment and look up. We get so entangled in church politics, so enmeshed in the busyness of running the church that we just lose sight of what God really wants from us. There are wilderness places in the church that we're afraid to go. We won't talk about the family secrets, even though it might free us for a different future. We won't open the doors, even though doing so might mean entertaining angels. We won't let go of our hold on issues, even though letting go might mean we could hear the voice in the wilderness.

For Oak Grove this year, the wilderness place is turning out to be the budget, and there is going to have to be some serious conversation about not only how we're going to use our funds to carry us through this particular economic wilderness, but also what we need to plan for if things don't turn around, if pledges and membership don't increase in 2009. The Budget and Finance Committee and the session have already begun those conversations, and we are learning that talking about it honestly and openly generates new ideas and may indeed free us for a different future. We have to decide what's important, where our priorities lie, and, most importantly, what God is calling us to do. In some ways, we have to let go of our preconceived ideas about who we are and what our future should be, and that takes a lot of trust, which sometimes seems to be in short supply when it comes to talking about money.

There's a sign in my office at home that I can see every time I look up from the computer. It's often been what gives me what I need to take one more step. It says, "When we come to the end of all the light we have, we must believe one of two things: either we will find something firm to stand on, or we will be taught to fly." Advent is a good time to test that out.

Advent is a good time to let go. If you feel like you're stumbling along in the dark by yourself, hold out your hand. You may be led to a reconciliation, you may be led to forgiveness, you may be led to speaking the truth in love. Just don't be afraid to hold out your hand. It's a good time for all of us, individually and as a congregation, to set off in the dark without a map, without directions, and see where the Spirit will lead us. We know that in good time, in God's time, we'll end up in Bethlehem.

So get ready, prepare the way, pack up your spiritual backpack and head for the wilderness. You know what you need. Take some water so you remember the water of your own baptism and the waters of the Jordan River that baptized us all; take something that will fill you up in the long, dry spells, like the Word of God; and be sure to take something for the manger, because the Child of God will be born again at Christmas and every day thereafter. You don't want to be unprepared. Amen.