

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 10, 2017
Second Sunday of Advent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:7-13
2 Peter 3:8-18
Mark 1:1-8

In churches around the world today people are gathering and reading this Gospel text from Mark about the one whom God sent to prepare the minds and hearts of people for the coming of Jesus Christ. It may come as a surprise to us, but Jesus did not just “suddenly appear” on the stage of history. People were *prepared* for his coming.

Today is the day in the Advent season when we are introduced to one of the persons responsible for that preparation. His name was John. And he was, to say the least, an interesting character. *Have you ever heard John preach?*

From his birth John was set aside as a *Nazarite*. In those days, this meant that John was a person devoted to God who lived away from society, usually in the desert or wilderness. Nazarites would venture into cities and towns, but they were not social creatures. A Nazarite did not trim his beard or cut his hair, and lived a very unusual life.

John was a Nazarite. He lived and worked in the desert. The Word of God came to him in the desert.

Luke tells us in his Gospel that when Jesus was about 30 years old, he shook the shavings from his carpenter's apron and folded it on the bench and went into the house and said "goodbye" to his mother and his brothers and sisters. He made his way Southward into the desert where John was preaching. Jesus heard John preach, and was baptized by him in the Jordan River.

John's preaching ultimately landed him in prison, and when it did, Jesus took up the ministry himself, preaching in his early days very much as John had preached. And when John was executed, Jesus preached his funeral sermon. He said, "What did you go out to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What did you expect to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, they belong in kings' houses. He was the prophet of God. He was God's preacher." And what an extraordinary preacher he was.

Have you ever heard John preach?

If you haven't, you will, because on your way to Bethlehem for Christmas, you have to go through the desert. And that's where John is. His preaching is extraordinary. Crowds come from everywhere. Mark says that people came from all over Judea, from the small towns and villages and even from Jerusalem. I can easily imagine plows being abandoned in the furrows, bread left in the oven, shops left unattended, and school being dismissed early as the crowds hastily moved into the desert to hear this extraordinary man preach.

No doubt many who went to hear John did so out of curiosity, intrigued by the way he talked and how he looked. A shaggy fellow eating locusts and wild honey, wearing camel's hair sashed with a leather belt around his waist. With a stump for his pulpit, with the stars for the chandelier of his cathedral, with the Jordan River as his baptismal font, John preached.

The preaching was not smooth and beautiful. It lacked polish. John never claimed to be a chef offering up fancy gourmet dishes. He just broke the bread of God with his bare hands and said, "Eat this and live."

John was no beautiful candle burning softly in a sanctuary. He was a *prairie fire scorching the earth*. He was no diplomat trying to make "yes" sound like "no" and "no" sound like "yes" to please everybody. He just said, "The Judge is coming, and I'm here to serve subpoenas." *And in spite of this, the people still came.*

There was something about him, something persuasive and compelling. As the huge crowds listened to him, they began to ask: "If the Christ is coming, what should we do?"

And John said: "If you have two of anything, share one of them with someone who is poorer than you are. If you have two coats, you don't need two coats. Give one of them away to a person who is cold and poor."

Soldiers came. Roman soldiers came to hear him preach. They asked him, “What are *we* to do?” And John said: “Don’t be violent. Don’t intimidate the citizens. Don’t throw your weight around to subsidize your salary. Be content with your wages.”

Tax collectors came. They lingered until the crowds thinned, and they asked John: “What are *we* to do?” And John said: “Don’t collect more tax than is your due. Don’t add on anything. Keep yourself free of graft and corruption.” John spoke to people real straight, and apparently they liked it, because they kept coming.

When John preached, it was like people were brought into the presence of God, to that place where the light is *pure* and the truth is *clear*.

Have you ever had the experience where you force yourself to keep busy, and you keep the radio or the television on as your constant companion, because if you don’t you know things will grow quiet and you will be confronted with silence, and in the silence you will find yourself alone, just you and God, where you will have to confront what is really going on? Well, John’s preaching had a way of removing the clutter and noise, until people found themselves flat out in the presence of God.

Have you ever heard John preach? When John preached, people came and made confession. Not so much in the sense of *expressing* their faith, but in the

sense of *coming clean about life*. Something about John made it easy for people to come clean about their lives. He used wonderful images to help people do this.

He said, “This moment in history is like an axe being laid at the root of a tree, and if the tree has not borne good fruit, it comes down.”

He said, “This moment in your life is like the moment when a person has harvested the grain but it is still full of chaff, so he takes a large fan and while the grain is being poured from one container to another, the fan is used to blow away the chaff until it is all gone. The grain is saved but the chaff is burned. And I’m here to tell you that someone is coming who holds the fan in his hands. He is blowing away the chaff, causing the truth to come clean and clear. No more deception. No more pretending. He is coming, and I’m not even worthy to untie his sandals.”

And still the people came. I suspect that many of them never intended to do so, but after hearing John preach, they *confessed*. They confessed their distorted values, their messed up priorities, their irresponsibility, their bigotry and hatred and prejudice. They confessed the mess they had made of their lives and their relationships. They came, they listened, and they confessed. And they were baptized for the forgiveness of sin – *and for the beginning of a new life*.

Several years ago I was on an airplane, and found myself in conversation with the man sitting next to me. When the conversation came to my work, I told

him what I did. He told me that growing up as a kid he was always in church, but had long since left. “I haven’t been in church for years,” he said.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Well,” he said, “I guess I came to doubt.”

“You doubted the existence of God?” I asked.

“Oh no, not at all. It was more that I began to doubt what the church was saying.”

I asked, “What did the church say that you doubted?”

I’ll never forget what came next. He said: *“I think I came to doubt that it was really possible for a person to be forgiven and to begin a new life.”*

“It’s true,” I said. “You can.”

“Really?” he said. “You seriously believe that?” Then he began to tell me his story, a story of great loss. He had lost his wife, his children, and ultimately his business that he spent years working to build. He told me how much he would like to have a new start, to turn a corner, to begin anew.

I told him, “It’s true. You can have that new beginning.”

He looked at me as though I was from Mars. I began searching for images to try to explain it to him. I thought of John’s preaching. I said, “Do you have children?” “Yes,” he said. “A daughter.”

I said, “What do you remember about the day she was born?”

He smiled. “I remember family gathered at the window of the nursery in the hospital, staring at her. She had no hair, no marks, just the little band on her wrist. She was brand new. She was perfect.”

“Yes,” I said. “A new birth is a beautiful thing, isn’t it?” He nodded, lost in the thought of that memory.

With John’s preaching ringing in my head, I said to him: “It’s true. It’s *really* true. It is possible to have a new beginning.”

Have you ever heard John preach? If you haven’t, you will, because on the way to Bethlehem you have to go through the desert. Well, actually, you *can* get to Bethlehem without going through the desert. But if you do, know this: it won’t be Christmas.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.