

12.18.22

Cousin John

Mark 1:1-8

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We've been learning about the family of Jesus this advent and we've looked at Jesus' family tree and discovered that even Jesus' family had its interesting characters, challenges, and difficulties. Last week we reflected on Jesus' godly relatives Zechariah and Elizabeth who learned that what felt like punishment by God was in fact a time of preparation for something beyond what they could have imagined in their prayers. While some of us may not have been as familiar with the genealogy of Jesus or with John's parents, more of us have probably heard of Jesus' cousin John the Baptist. We meet him in all four Gospels. **Matthew** starts his Gospel with a genealogy of Jesus family. **Luke** starts his Gospel with Zechariah and Elizabeth. **Mark** begins his Gospel with John the Baptizer. **Mark 1:1-8,**

"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.*"

Every one of us probably has at least one relative who is a little, shall we say, different. Not in a bad way necessarily, simply different - someone who walks to the beat of his or her own drum. The kind of relative you always wonder where to put when you're making seating arrangements for Christmas dinner. John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus, is that kind of relative. Only six months older than Jesus, John is the kind of relative you might hesitate to have over because John was never concerned about what

he wore, and his eating habits were not appealing to most people. John also didn't bother himself about social graces or consequences when it came to speaking the truth.

John was the son of a priest and came from a family of priests, which can be difficult, because people often place unrealistic expectations on the children of religious leaders. If you think your parents put heavy expectations on you, remember what was expected of John. John was told he'd be "*great in the sight of the Lord.*" He'd never drink wine or strong drink. No punch bowl marked "*with,*" no Kahlua in the desserts. He would be full of the Holy Spirit, turning many of the people of Israel back to God. He would turn the hearts of parents to the proper care, nurture and training of their children helping reconcile parent and child. He would inspire the disobedient to change their ways and to seek the wisdom of those whose lives were humble and holy. Overall, making "*ready a people prepared for the Lord.*" And you thought your parents had lofty expectations of you!

As we get closer to Christmas we all know this is a season of expectation and expectations. Expectations about what we do, where we go, who we see, decorations we put up, cards we send, songs we sing, foods we make and eat, gifts we give and receive. There's a lot of preparation to be done for Christmas in order that many of these expectations are fulfilled, isn't there? In addition to attending worship, some of the things you've done to prepare for Christmas in the last week might include cleaning, cooking, making, or getting gifts, shopping, writing cards, and decorating.

How does John the Baptist tell us to prepare for the coming of Christ? John prepares for the Mightier One who is coming by calling people to **confess, repent and be baptized**. I wonder if confessing your sins and repenting made your Christmas to do list. We prepare for Christmas by decorating our homes, shopping, baking, eating, and going to parties. Then into our Christmas plans and preparations comes John the Baptist like a guy crashing our potluck Christmas dinner party asking, "*Where do you want the locusts and honey?*" John doesn't fit into our Christmas plans very well.

John wears only the simplest clothes and doesn't give a hoot about what is "*in*" or fashionable so forget about dressing up or ordering new clothes to stimulate the economy. John was preparing the way for Christ who would bring good news for the poor, so the idea that some businesses would do the majority of their selling and profit

making to mark the birth of Jesus, would probably be greeted by John with amazement and some choice words.

John the Baptist prepares for the coming of the Messiah by practicing acts of self-discipline and purification and by inviting others to do the same. We prepare by feasting at all kinds of events. By now we know why John is out in the wilderness. He's the kind of spiritual person who makes others uncomfortable. We don't want this wet blanket, religious fanatic putting a damper on *our* holiday. That's why, according to Luke 7:33, those who didn't like him or believe him said of John, who came eating no bread and drinking no wine, "*He has a demon.*"

Although his message may seem hard to your ears, John was incredibly popular. People flocked to hear his message, confess their sins and to be baptized. The clear voice of prophecy had not been heard in Israel for 300 plus years, so people longed for an authoritative word from the Lord. They wanted to know God hadn't forgotten them and they longed to be connected to God. Because he's in the wilderness and not part of the religious establishment, John is free to speak the word of God without much concern for the consequences. John speaks the truth to people living in anxiety; to people who recognize they need to get their lives cleaned up and straightened out. He's preaching to people who recognize they have valleys in their lives that need to be filled - to folks who have mountains and hills that need to be flattened and made smooth. John is preaching a grace-filled powerful word about the path to forgiveness and right relationship with God for those of us who have done wrong, missed the mark, hurt others, misused power, or beaten themselves up over their sins.

The significance in John's baptism lay in the fact that those who were **already Jews** were to undergo a baptism, a cleansing with water, similar to that required **of converts to Judaism**, in order to prepare for the judgment of the Mighty One John said was coming. All people, insiders and outsiders, long time members of the faith community and newcomers, were invited to repent. Repentance means more than being sorry, more than remorse, more than admitting mistakes. Repentance means a complete change of heart and mind, a new direction of the will, an altered purpose in our lives. **Repentance is the basis of all spiritual change and progress.** Ebenezer

Scrooge in Charles Dickens's, *A Christmas Carol*, personifies the change of heart, mind, and will that reflects true repentance and a new set of priorities.

An older woman returned home from an evening worship service and was startled by a man robbing her home, she yelled, "*Stop! Acts 2:38!*" The burglar stopped dead in his tracks. The woman called the police and they responded immediately. As the officer cuffed the man to take him in, he asked the burglar, "*Why did you just stand there? All the old lady did was yell a scripture at you.*" "*Scripture?*" replied the burglar, "*she said she had an axe and two 38's!*"

Acts 2:38 is, "***Turn from your sin and be baptized.***"

John's baptism with water was a preparation for the baptism of the Holy Spirit Jesus would give. John's water baptism was done externally as a sign of turning away from former thoughts, habits, ways of speaking and living. Today we're baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, not only as a sign of turning away from sin, but so we may rise to live out our new life in Christ. We witnessed that last Sunday.

Each person has to make up her or his mind about John the Baptist. What do you think about John? Does he have a demon as his critics claimed? Or does he speak the truth? If John speaks the truth, as the church of Jesus Christ has believed, then perhaps we need to re-examine our expectations and how we prepare for Christmas.

John doesn't sing sweet carols. He sings a song of warning and hope. **In Mark's gospel, the good news of Jesus doesn't begin with an angel visiting Mary or Joseph, or angels singing to shepherds; it doesn't begin with visitors bearing gifts; it begins with a call to repentance, with an invitation to turn your life around and to turn it over to God's loving guidance and direction.** God's grace is evident in sending John to issue the invitation to all people to turn from their old ways of thinking and living. Confessing your sin is necessary to be spared judgment and to receive God's forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit. John's message of preparation is an ancient one that God also spoke through the prophet Isaiah. Every valley shall be exalted, every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight and the rough places plain. The way needs to be made straight for God to come swiftly to God's people.

**How much easier would it be for God to come into your life if you prepared and straightened the way?** If you desire God to come into your life for the first time, or

in a deeper way than you've yet experienced, you might ask yourself, *"What is crooked in my life that needs to be made straight? What are the rough areas that need to be made smooth? What mountains and hills need to be made low? What valleys need to be lifted up?"* Is there a mountain of pride and self-sufficiency you've built rock by rock through the years that now approaches a Himalayan peak? Is there a valley of inadequacy that has been dug for so long that it's now so deep that you can't see out? Are there rough areas of speaking to others in ways that are unkind, inconsiderate, or out of anger or self-justification that you need God's help to smooth? **Many of us are experts at identifying the crookedness, the hills, and the valleys in other people's lives. We can even be eager to point them out and can provide detailed maps as to their size, shape, and exact location.**

Repentance, however, is the much more challenging task of going over the topography **of your own life**, asking God to come and to examine us like a master surveyor, and to point out what can and needs to be altered with God's help.

When we long for and are in the presence of God, then we become more concerned with our own sin, rather than the sins of others. Our reaction will be like that of Isaiah when he says, *"Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips and I have seen the Lord of hosts."* A ministry colleague who is a Roman Catholic priest said to me, *"People like to sin at will, very specifically and to confess in general at their leisure."* Yet it's through confession that we're bathed in the forgiveness and cleansing of the Lord to be purer, holier, and more contented people.

How do we prepare for the coming of Christ at Christmas? In the midst of the church activities, worship services, parties, cards, gifts, and travel - all of which are good, enjoyable, and appropriate - **John reminds us not to neglect God's gracious gifts of confession and repentance.** God gives us the gift of John the Baptist to remind you every Christmas season that your most important Christmas preparations begin within your own heart and soul. The words of the well-known carol still hold true, *"No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in."*

All four Gospels mention the key role of John the Baptist in preparing the way for Jesus. In **John 3:25-30**, we hear John the Baptist's disciples lamenting that all the

people are now going to Jesus. Perhaps they're concerned that John's prominence and consequently theirs is diminishing. John says something important in reply (John 3:29b-30), "***my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.***" That's not only John's mission and hope, but yours and mine as well. **That Jesus would increase in our lives** and our sinful, broken, prideful, missing the mark self would decrease.

**Christmas is about Jesus increasing and having more of you** - heart, mind, body, and soul. John the Baptizer urges all of us to clean up and open up our life so that Jesus can increase in us, not just at Christmas time, but all through the year. John reminds us Christmas isn't a day, it's a lifestyle.

And when you gather for Christmas dinner, don't forget to pass the locusts and honey.

### **Blessing:**

May our *lives*, like John's, point the way to Christ.

May our *words* like John's be words of praise to Jesus.

May John's *joy* at the coming of the Savior be in your heart this Christmas season

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. What are you doing to prepare for Christmas? What difference does preparation make for a significant event or the arrival of an important person?
2. What Old Testament prophecies does John appear to fulfill?
3. How would you describe what John said and did to someone who has never heard of him?
4. Why do you think people responded to John in such a significant way?
5. How are confession and repentance gifts of God for our benefit, rather than burdens that must be endured?
6. How much easier would it be for God to come into your life if you prepared and straightened the way? What is one step you can take this week to make it easier for the Spirit of Christ to be a greater part of your life?