

“God’s Mouth”  
Based on Mark 1:1-8  
Preached on Dec. 6, 2020

Fellow baptized saints, you know it’s Advent when John the Baptist appears on the scene. “Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.” John is our Advent preacher, calling to us from the wilderness, calling us to the water of Baptism, pointing with that long, bony finger to Christ saying, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” That’s all John is good for. That’s all he is there for. Preparing a royal highway of repentance. He is God’s bulldozer, leveling the high places and filling in the low ones, making the uneven ground level and the rough places plain.

John’s appearance out of nowhere in the Jordan wilderness marks a transition from old to new, from prophetic time to the fulness of time. John stands on the threshold of something new, the dawning kingdom of God. He comes in the way of the Old Testament prophets who came before him. His clothing and appearance evoke images of Elijah. He even appears in the same place that Elijah disappeared, being whisked to heaven by the chariots and horsemen of Israel. John is Malachi’s messenger who goes before the Lord to prepare His way. He is Isaiah’s “voice” calling in the wilderness. He is God’s last word before the coming of the Word in the Flesh.

John stands with one foot in the old and one in the new. He stands with the prophets of Israel, but his finger and gaze look forward. He comes not with commandments and sacrifices in the way of Moses, but with a baptism, a washing of repentance. This is how the way of the Lord is prepared. Not by making a list and checking it twice, nor by pious platitudes and feeble attempts at “trying harder,” but by baptismal repentance. A return to the water. He stands in the wilderness and dares to call Israel out of the safety of the temple and the city, to go back into the wilderness where God made them a people through the parted water of the Sea.

And this is what he’s doing to us. John calls us away from our false securities, our false identities, all the ways we attempt to justify ourselves and our actions. He calls us out of those transactions of religion by which we try to bribe God and make Him follow our marching orders. John will have none of that. It doesn’t matter whether you are a priest or a prostitute, a teacher of Torah or a tax collector. It doesn’t matter whether you are among the religious elite or the riff-raff. John is no respecter of person or reputation. His message is the same for you, for me, for everyone – repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.

We’d be challenged to welcome John today. It’s good he came when he did. Today, we’d ignore him or lock him up or write him off as being out of his mind. A religious fanatic. A kook. An oddball. A misfit. It would be easy. Look at how he looks! Camel’s hair, a leather belt. Look at what he eats! Locusts and wild honey. He’s an untamed wild man. He might be dangerous. On drugs. Delusional. We wouldn’t know what to do with him.

But He knows what to do with us. He would say, “Never mind me. I’m not important. There. Look. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Who takes your sin too. Get ready for Him. Repent. Learn to see yourself as sinner and Christ as savior. And never mind me or you. I must decrease, and so must you. He must increase. I’ve baptized you with water, but you haven’t seen

nothing yet. He will baptize you with the fire of the Holy Spirit. I am the servant, He is the Master. I'm not worthy even to do Him the lowest of service of the lowest servant - untie His sandals. And yet He is willing to step down from His throne and take up a cross to save me. He is the Lord of all and yet has become the servant of all. Don't follow me, follow Him."

John teaches us what it means to live in Advent. Not so much the season as these end times we're in, the advent of the coming age. John is in the world yet not of the world. He lives as one who is already dead to this world. His cares and concerns are elsewhere. He doesn't worry about what he will eat or what he will wear. Camel's hair is fine, a belt will do. No need for a closet full of clothes. John packs lightly. Locusts and honey are sufficient for his daily food. No one could possibly accuse him of gluttony or drunkenness. John is the fast before the feast. He is Advent before Christmas. He is the church in these last days (you and I), waiting, watching, preparing for, focused on the coming of the Lord.

Let's face it. John makes us uncomfortable. Not just by how he looks and what he eats, but by the very way he presents himself. He reminds us of how distracted we are. How lazy and complacent we can be. How easily we turn from things eternal to things temporal. His odd diet stands up against our gluttony, our preoccupation with food, our anxieties over what we will eat. His dress stands in contrast to the fashions of our age - because John is decidedly unfashionable. He calls into judgment our anxieties over what we will wear as we forget the lilies of the field who are clothed by God though here today and gone tomorrow.

But the thing that makes us most uncomfortable about John is that he dares to preach the wrath of God, the winnowing fork that sorts the wheat from the chaff, the unquenchable fire of judgment. We'd rather not hear that sort of thing. We'd prefer to block our ears and drown out the cries of "Repent!" But then, we wouldn't be prepared. Prepared hearts are hearts that have been plowed through and turned over by the Law. "A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." The Law must break through the hard pack of unbelief. It must crack through our shallowness and plow into the very depths of our souls, revealing how deep the sickness of Sin really goes - far deeper than Covid, Ebola and Zika put together. The Law must clear away the bramble, the weeds that choke the Word, the crabgrass in our lives that smothers our hearing and the Word's fruitfulness in our day. Our hearts must be broken and ground up if they are to be comforted and restored. Without the fear of the Lord there is no faith in Christ.

Beloved, if we are going to be advent people, we must learn to become comfortable with discomfort. Embrace it for what it is, the work of God's Law upon our hearts. We are no better than the worst of sinners in the world. And we might even be worse than they, because we have the Word and know better. We need to become comfortable with that eschatological tension of living in the now and the not yet, of having one foot in this age and the other in the age to come - Like John - who straddled the old and new covenants, we too live in the "now" of this present age and wait for the "not yet" of the coming kingdom. That's who you are. - - - This calls for faith - trust in the promise of God that God will not fail, that His kingdom will indeed come, that His Will is going to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Comfortable with discomfort.

Look around the world, we see dying and decay, the old order of things passing away, the old institutions cracking and crumbling. What once seemed unshakable now seems irreparably broken. The things we trusted the most in this life seem the least trustworthy today. The institutions of home, church, and state, those three pillars of the temporal kingdom, seem wobbly in the face of the seismic shifts that are occurring all round us. Confidence in government is gone. Confidence in the church and its clergy has given way to a cultural complacency where increasingly the religious preference of our people is “none.” And the home, the first pillar of the temporal kingdom and the order from which all order flows, the home has been shaken to its core by the demise of marriage and the birth of easy divorce.

(quiet and steady) Yet standing amidst the ruins is our Advent preacher John calling out as voice in our wilderness and saying, “Repent.” Repent of your false trusts, those idols that you’ve adopted whom you fear, love, and trust above God Himself. Repent of your preoccupation with your self, of your pieties, your transactional religions, your false trusts in mortal men who cannot save. Repent of your idolatry of the family that puts the focus on family instead of on Christ. Repent of your idolatry of the state that views one nation superior to the others and where love of country has given way to pride and prejudice and arrogance. Repent of your idolatry of the church that puts the Bride ahead of her Groom, that sets the Church over Christ. Repent - and return to the water of Baptism.

The way of the Lord is a straight path, a highway that leads directly to the cross and the tomb and on to resurrection. Already the day has dawned. Christ has risen. Christ has come to you and made you His own, blood bought citizens of His kingdom. But there is still the “not yet,” that which is to come, what we long for and hope for and pray continually for. What the whole creation groans for, the redemption of our bodies in the resurrection where finally the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ.

Prepare the way of the Lord. Return to the waters, confessing your sin, embracing your death, taking up your cross and following your Savior into His coming glory. He is coming soon. Watch for it. Wait for it. Long for it. Your salvation is near. In the Name of Jesus, Amen.