

Pointing the Way to Jesus
Preacher: Rev. Jill Olds
Date: January 11, 2015

16:49

Sermon on Mark 1: Pointing the Way to Jesus

Let us pray. Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts and minds together be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer, Amen.

Okay, it's time for true confessions: Who still has Christmas decorations up? Ours just went away this past week, in keeping with our tradition to hang onto them until Epiphany. But, since it's time for true confessions, it's also partly because I am like a little kid when it comes to Christmas. It's always been my favorite holiday; like many of yours, I'm sure, my family has a myriad of traditions that feel almost sacred around what foods we cook, how we decorate the house, when presents are given, the carols we sing as we gather around my mom's piano...the list goes on. And even though December 24th and 25th are no longer "days off" for my husband or me in the strictest sense, when I was serving a church full-time, I still found myself tapping into the wonder and mystery and joy of the season, particularly in crafting and leading meaningful worship services. No doubt, Christmas is a special time for many of us and, at least for me, saying goodbye to all of that for another 11 months always makes me a little sad.

So, a look back to Christmas for a second. Part of my Christmas preparations involve sending and receiving Christmas cards. This year, we actually opted to do electronic cards, for both monetary and environmental reasons, which I'll confess felt like a little bit of a loss because one of my favorite things about Christmas cards is the stunningly beautiful Christian artwork: the star piercing the black sky, the always seemingly calm new parents and baby Christ child, the shepherds and cute little sheep stunned with the angels' sudden appearance... there are several from which to choose, and I imagine that all of you can add images of the Biblical story to this list. But, as many Christmas cards as I have seen, I'm certain I have never seen one with John the Baptist, his hair long and unkempt blowing in the wind, his crude clothing of simple camel's hair billowing about him, honey and locusts at his feet, and a barren wilderness with a muddy river for the scenic backdrop.

"John the Baptist is totally inappropriate for the way we celebrate Christmas." John is the quintessential weirdo, someone whom one would make a point of not inviting to the holiday dinner party—after all, his only contribution would be insects for an appetizer. John is an odd duck who enjoys water, particularly water that he says will cleanse people's souls, preparing them for something else, or more accurately, someone else. Christmas is about the angels, the manger, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, even the three wise men, though history tells us they don't appear until well after—likely years after—Jesus' birth, and is more of the story of Epiphany than of Christmas. But even the three wise men on a Christmas card seems more appropriate than this bizarre loudmouth crying in the wilderness, dunking people in the Jordan River. So why does our lectionary steer us to this story for this Sunday, this Sunday so soon after Christmas, and the first Sunday of the season of Epiphany? What does John the Baptist have to do with Christmastide?

For the Gospel according to Mark, John the Baptist has everything to do with Christmas. "Instead of Bethlehem and choirs of angels, he begins the story of Jesus' coming with a prophet blaring and baptizing in the wilderness of Judea." This is the man God has sent to prepare the world for God's own son, Jesus Christ. John is brazen—he minces no words, he pulls no punches, does not "play nice" or make backroom deals with the leaders of his day, and he angers and frustrates many, particularly those in positions of power who were content

with the status quo of the day. And it eventually costs him his life. But his message is always clear: he has come to make preparations for one who is more powerful. John prepares the way for Jesus, priming the pump for the Holy Spirit, warming the hearts of Jesus' future followers, and Jesus' ministry was certainly more successful because of John's anticipatory work. Jesus was deeply indebted to John, no doubt about it. In fact, when the news of John's death reaches Jesus, Jesus withdraws from the crowds and even from his disciples for some alone time, presumably to grieve alone. John clearly meant a great deal to Jesus, both personally and professionally: he pointed the way to Jesus, and he prepared the way for his cousin's message of love and salvation to be received.

This Sunday is the first Sunday after Epiphany, and is the beginning of a season of light and illumination, a season when we celebrate the light coming into the darkness, and the darkness not overcoming it. If we were to view this time in our Christian calendar as a journey, this Sunday of Epiphany and the ones that follow it for the next month or so serve as a bridge between Christmastide and Lent. One on side of the bridge, we see Jesus coming down from heaven as a baby to live amongst us; on the other side we turn down the inevitably darkened road that leads us to Good Friday. Between Christmas and Lent is Epiphany: a season of light that reminds us of the presence of the Light of the World with a look back to Christmas, and a nod towards the cross. So, with this in mind, John the Baptist is the perfect bridge, the connection between the birth of Jesus and his journey towards death, illuminating the way in perfect Epiphany-like fashion. John points the way to Jesus in life (they sort of even met one another while they were in their mothers' wombs), and also serves as a harbinger for Jesus' death, both in his teachings and in his own execution.

Friends, a question. Who points the way to Jesus for you? Who is your John the Baptist? To qualify for such an honor, your John the Baptist need only do two things: live a Christ-centered life, and point the way for you to do the same. This person might be your best friend, your old pastor, or a certain saint from your past. But he or she might also be someone entirely different. The person who points the way to Jesus for you is likely not someone who speaks easy truths, and may not be the most joyful soul in the world. John the Baptist was likely quite obnoxious to many of those who were listening to him. So your John the Baptist could be someone difficult, someone whose words make you squirm in your seat, someone who challenges you to see the parts of your life that you don't want to see.

One of my John the Baptists is a man named Shane Claiborne. Shane Claiborne is a simple, unassuming 40-something-year-old who grew up in Tennessee. His original intention was to go into youth ministry, but after he began his studies at Princeton Seminary, he took a leave of absence to work alongside Mother Teresa in Calcutta. The experience changed him. After returning to the states, he began to develop relationships with the homeless in Philadelphia, eventually deciding to become intentionally homeless, living with them on the streets. He moved on to form a non-profit group of Christians in Philadelphia, known as the Simple Way, which essentially describes their way of life. They profess a life of nonviolence, spirituality, community, and mutual accountability. Claiborne's first book, entitled *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*, is a game-changer for me every time I read it. Here's a little taste of Claiborne's prophetic witness from *Irresistible Revolution*: "While the voices of blockbuster movies and pop culture cry out for a life outside of the matrix of numb efficiency, Christianity has often offered little to the world, other than the hope that things will be better in heaven...there is a pervasive sense that things are not right in the world, and the gentle suggestion that maybe they don't have to stay this way...But most Christian artists and preachers have remained strangely distant from human suffering, offering the world eternal assurance over prophetic imagination." No pastor can hear that they preach "eternal assurance over prophetic imagination" and not be challenged by that.

Claiborne goes on: "Meanwhile, many of us find ourselves estranged from the narrow issues that define conservatives and from the shallow spirituality that marks liberals. We are thirsty for social justice and peace but have a hard time finding a faith community that is consistently pro-life or that recognizes that there are "moral issues" other than homosexuality and abortion,

moral issues like war and poverty. So some folks just end up trying to save individual souls from their sins, and others end up trying to save the world from “the system.” But rarely do we see that the sickness of our world has infected each of us, and that the healing of our world not only begins within us but does not end with us...In college, one of my professors said, “Don’t let the world steal your soul. Being a Christian is about choosing Jesus and deciding to do something incredibly daring with your life.”... Thankfully, there is a movement of ordinary radicals sweeping the land, and ordinary people are choosing to live life in radical new ways. So this is a book for ordinary radicals, not for saints who think they have a monopoly on radical and not for normal people who are satisfied with the way things are.”

Shane Claiborne is one of my John the Baptists because his words call me to task. I like to think that I am a pretty conscientious person, but—time for true confessions, after all—I confess that I am often blind to this. Claiborne makes his own clothes, converted his car to run on leftover cooking oil, and lives a life of poverty partially because he won’t pay taxes that go to wars he does not morally support. That type of witness challenges me. After Kevin and I read the book for the first time, we switched to drinking Fair Trade Coffee in our home, and we have since gone organic with the majority of our meat, milk, and eggs, not only for health reasons, but also as a way to speak with our money against inhumane treatment of the animal kingdom. We work towards giving away 10% of our income, and regardless of whether or not our salaries increase, we incrementally increase our pledge to whichever church or churches we are involved, so that we can reach that goal in a few years. We have made strides, but we still have a long way to go. And my John the Baptists, like Shane Claiborne, continue to challenge me. Who is your John the Baptist? Who points the way to Jesus for you, challenging you to live a more socially conscious and faithful life?

My next question to you is equally important, particularly in this season of Epiphany. Epiphany is a season that celebrates the light of Jesus being present in the world, much like the wise men seeking a bright star amidst the darkness. How are you being a John the Baptist, alighting the way to Jesus so that others may see? Would anyone think of you as their John the Baptist? Would someone hear this sermon and think, “You know, that Susan, she’s a real pain in the neck. But yeah, okay, she makes good points, and she always tries to follow Jesus. And seeing her do that calls me to task.” We should all have someone be able to say that about us.

John the Baptist, the most unlikely of all Christmas heroes, models for us an approach to our post-Christmas living. He asks two questions of us: Who points the way to Jesus for you, and how will you illuminate the path to him? Friends, Jesus has once again entered this world. As we move on from Christmas and into a new season, let us welcome Jesus once again, by both listening to the challenge from our John the Baptists, and by pointing the way to Him for others in our thoughts, prayers, words, and deeds. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.