

First Presbyterian Church – Charlotte, NC
December 7, 2014
Rev. Pen Peery

Getting Straightened Out
Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight."'

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

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In the four Sundays of Advent that lead up to Christmas we are spending time focusing on what makes the Incarnation such good news. Christmas, of course, is the time when we marvel one of the great mysteries of our faith: that the "Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Today our theme is forgiveness – and our Scripture passage comes from the first chapter of Mark’s gospel. Listen with me for the word of God...

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When it comes to telling the story of Advent and Christmas, the author of Mark’s gospel is the biblical equivalent of Scrooge.

When Matthew introduces us to who Jesus is and what he means, he gives us the story of Joseph being visited by an angel in a dream; Matthew gives us the story of the wise men following a star to Bethlehem.

Luke gives us a story about no room in the inn and mangers with hay and swaddling clothes.

John gives us a magnificent poem: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.*

Mark? Here is how Mark starts his gospel; this is the beginning of his version of the good news of Jesus Christ: *repent, sinners.*¹

Now what is Hallmark supposed to do with that?
How is a story like this supposed to translate into a children’s Christmas pageant?

Repent, sinners. This is no way to start a gospel.

It has been my experience that there are a tragic number of people who have left the church because the good news of the gospel has been eclipsed by the preaching of sin. And I need to be honest and tell you that I am tired of it.

I’m tired of fighting about what constitutes a sin and what doesn’t.

I’m tired of people missing the beauty and wonder of Christ’s love and life because we have turned Jesus into cosmic action figure for judgment.

I’m tired of wasting time on accusation and guilt and shame when we could be spending our time on reconciliation and healing and learning to appreciate the depth of God’s promises.

But for Mark, the beginning of the good news of the gospel has John the Baptist standing on center stage in the wilderness and shouting, “repent!” And what might

¹ I am indebted to my friend, the Rev. Andrew Foster Connors, Senior Pastor at Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, MD, for this quote and this “way in” to my sermon today. (The Well, 2011).

be more surprising than that is that people from the city and the countryside flocked to hear him and to do just what John said – repent.

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In the middle of the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is a sunken brick patio with two oak trees that students call “The Pit.” The Pit is a main thoroughfare on campus – so it has become a place where organizations and groups set up tables to engage potential volunteers as they walk by on the way to and from class.

When I was a student, The Pit was also the daily home to someone we called The Pit Preacher. The Pit Preacher had a cardboard sign to match his every opinion and every judgment. And, let me tell you, that is a lot of cardboard signs. I swear the man seemed like he took delight in pronouncing condemnation. On occasion, when you walked by, you might find the Pit Preacher locked in an argument with some student or student group who were finally fed-up with the mean-spirited venom that he spewed. To me, the Pit Preacher embodied the truism that Anne Lamotte coined a few years ago: “You know you have created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same things and people that you do.”

The Pit Preacher was big on repentance – but not in the same way as John the Baptist.

Because when the Pit Preacher talked about repentance it was connected to fire and to judgment. When the Pit Preacher talked about repentance, he was the one issuing a list of repentance-worthy behaviors. When the Pit Preacher talked about repentance, he had to force his way into the midst of the people by becoming a First-Amendment-Protected nuisance that the community, largely, ignored.

But the John the Baptist introduced to us by Mark’s gospel doesn’t promise fire and damnation when he talks about repentance. There is nothing about fire, or about threats; there is nothing about punishment. Mark’s John the Baptist proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. When John the Baptist talks about repentance it is connected to forgiveness, not condemnation.

And when John the Baptist talks about repentance, he doesn’t come at us with a list. He comes with an invitation – to be honest about the places where we think we need to turn around and to go a different way. To share the ways we need to change.

And John the Baptist doesn’t force the message – he doesn’t insert himself, awkwardly, into places of high visibility and conflict. We find John the Baptist – not in the city center – but in the wilderness. And the people who come to hear John preach about repentance make a choice to be there.

Yes, I think a reason why so many people flee the church is because, too often, when we get to talking about repentance what people hear is that the message of sin is the primary gospel. And if the primary message of the good news of the gospel is that you should feel badly about yourself, it is no wonder why people make the choice to walk out of the pews and not come back. But when it comes to repentance, sin is not the primary message.

As a friend has said, “Maybe we have forgotten that the promise of forgiveness is what enables people to confess their sins. The promise of forgiveness is what enables people to turn their lives around. The promise of forgiveness is the message that God offers to every person already broken by loss and grief, already broken by shame, already broken by guilt and regret. And there is a lot of loss, grief, shame, guilt, and regret to go around.”²

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I think it is easier to see those parts of ourselves that need forgiveness and changing when we are in the wilderness. As compelling as John the Baptist’s message was, I’m not sure people would have heard him were he to stand outside the temple in Jerusalem. Sometimes, in our busy day-to-day lives, it is hard to see (or admit) that there is any need of comfort, or change, or forgiveness because we have convinced ourselves that everything is just great – where for many of us, saying that things are “great” is just the way we cope.

When the Bible mentions the wilderness, it not a geographic description. When the Bible mentions the wilderness it is talking about a spiritual condition.

Have you had moments in your life when you realized you were in the wilderness? The moment when you realized that you were going to have to live with – and not be cured from – the disease or the addiction? The moment when you discovered that your relationship had been irrevocably broken? The moment when it hits you at the end of a particularly long day that you failed to become the person you always assumed you would be?³

If you have known these moments, then you know wilderness. It can be a lonely and scary place – but for Mark, it is also where John the Baptist shares the good news – because it is the wilderness where we begin to get things straightened out...where we start to understand what is not ours to control...where we come to know how much we need the forgiveness that John describes...and how much we need to change in order for our lives to reflect that forgiveness moving forward.

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² Foster Connors (The Well, 2011)

³ With thanks to the Rev. Tom Are, Jr., pastor of Village Presbyterian Church.

I wonder if John the Baptist was ever overwhelmed with what he must have heard when people confessed their sins and brokenness out there in the wilderness. I wonder if he ever had doubts about what kind of forgiveness would be possible for some of the people he baptized in the Jordan River. I wonder if his spirit was crushed by the sheer weight of the tragedies he must have heard – in the same way our spirits are crushed by the brokenness that we see: in wars the never cease, and inequality that seems impossible to address, and greed that blinds us from seeing one another as sisters and brothers, and situations that only we know that feel beyond the reach of grace.

I have to think that John felt overmatched – even with his camel’s hair, and leather belt, and locusts, and honey – out there in the wilderness, until he remembered that he was not the one promising to heal all of the brokenness. No, his job was to prepare the way for the one who would. His work was to proclaim the message of forgiveness and then to get out of the way so that the one who offers that promise might do his work.

One of the things about faith is that you and I don’t get to know how, exactly, Jesus is able to offer the kind of forgiveness that makes healing and reconciliation possible. We certainly don’t get the answer to why.

We don’t know how the heart of God is able to carry such brokenness and betrayal and sin...and bring all of it to redemption. We only know the story of the son of God who lived as one of us – who spent his life alongside broken people, loving them, who was innocent and yet crucified, who rose from the dead...still talking about forgiveness.

And I don’t know about you – but a God who is able to offer that kind of gift, who is able to demonstrate that kind of love, who is able to extend that kind of forgiveness, is a God who will cause me to consider the ways that I might need to change so that I can reflect the light of the one for whom we still wait.

Amen.