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Sermon: Hall-Mark  
Text: Mark 1:1-8  
December 10, 2023

Mark 1:1-8

<sup>1</sup> The beginning of the good news<sup>[a]</sup> of Jesus Christ.<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>2</sup> As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,<sup>[c]</sup>

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,<sup>[d]</sup>  
who will prepare your way,

<sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord;  
make his paths straight.’ ”

<sup>4</sup> so John the baptizer appeared<sup>[e]</sup> in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with<sup>[f]</sup> water, but he will baptize you with<sup>[g]</sup> the Holy Spirit.”

If we only had John the Baptist to rely on for our Christmas celebrations, it would be an austere and bleak and some what brief Advent and Christmas season. No mistle toe. No decking the halls with boughs of holly. No Christmas carols or Advent wreaths or Christmas trees or lights or ornaments. In fact, the first words of Mark’s gospel, are these: ‘the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,’ and the baby Jesus is already grown up and so is John the Baptist, already out in the wilderness calling people to transformation, forgiveness of sins, and repentance and renewal. Perhaps the most festive and colorful part of the whole scene is John the Baptist’s wardrobe and diet, clothed in camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, eating locusts and wild honey. Not exactly your Hallmark moment. In fact, this is all Mark says about the beginning of Jesus Christ’s life and ministry, and as far as I know John the Baptist does not have a prominent role in most Christmas pageants or nativity scenes. He’s too wild to be confused with the wise men, too pious and repentance minded to fall in with the shepherds, and certainly not pretty enough to be confused with an angel or part of the holy family. He’s also not very sentimental or overly welcoming. He can’t even get his diet marketed by a crack pot doctor, and he’s more interested in transformation than holiday aesthetics or seasonal charm. John the Baptist stands at Advent kind of like the Grinch who stole Christmas, tearing away all the ornaments and tinsel from our lives, and saying that this is what it means to prepare for Christ’s coming. I’ve never gotten a John the Baptist Christmas

card; I have never seen John the Baptist quoted on a Christmas greeting; 'prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight,' or repent and prepare for forgiveness of sins or prepare for fire and the Holy Spirit,' these are not the usual seasonal greetings we like to put under our Christmas picture and send to all our friends and loved ones.

There is nothing celebratory or festive or joyful about John the Baptist. And I wonder in addition to being the forerunner to Jesus, he is also the depiction of what grace-less religion looks like. Plenty of striving, plenty of pursuit of righteousness, plenty of seriousness and austerity, plenty of personal repentance and self-examination, but not a lot of joy or celebration or camaraderie and love for others. I'm reminded of an insight of Frederick Buechner, who wrote that we think life is about 'power, success, happiness, as the world knows them,' and each of us can attain them if we are willing to fight for them hard enough, [or pursue them hard enough, or work to attain them hard enough], but peace, love, and joy are only from God.<sup>1</sup> And I also wonder if a religion that is only focused on self-betterment or measuring personal attainments, while all well and good, may lead us to some moderate improvement in our lives here and there, but are not all that it means to take part in life together as a Christian community. To become a disciple of Jesus Christ, to become a part of the Christian community, to mark Advent and celebrate Christmas is to long for peace, love, and joy that spill out of the life of Christ and are not something we can program into ourselves no matter how good we get at repenting and preparing the way. Many years ago, I had a dear member of the church who was dying of cancer and it was a communion Sunday and he and his wife asked if we might share communion together at his hospital bed later that day. We did and only several days later he succumbed to his illness. I remember talking to him about what was to come, and he and his wife saying that they were not ready for this to be the end, that they wished they had more years together, more things to do, more places to see, more life to live, they had accepted that timeline was coming then they one they wanted for themselves. They were ready even if they were not ready.

I think that is what Advent and maybe John the Baptist too are preparing us for...a peace, love, and joy, that does not come on all our terms, but that perhaps is even more elusive and baffling if we are not looking, preparing, waiting, and hoping for it. Like many firsts, I was not fully prepared for my first job. I was a 22 year old

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, 18.

teaching 17 and 18 year olds history and most days I was lucky if I stayed, not one chapter ahead, but one page ahead. I had to get up early every day. I had to commute a good distance to work every day. And while the \$21,000 contract I signed in the summer seemed like an awful lot amount of money, after rent, gas, groceries, and utilities, I was learning just how precious little it really was. Some days on my early morning commute I would fantasize that if I just kept driving west, I could be in my parents 'driveway by sunset, and the challenges of keeping order in a classroom or grading papers or navigating timing belts or fuel injection systems could be put off for another day. Was I the prodigal son who finally came to himself in the far country? Was I the 22 year old who until that point that the whole point of life was to graduate from college, start working, get on with adulting, and was coming to realize that there was a lot of this this was not all that fun? Was I the young adult being made to see that pursuing power, success, and happiness might be enough to make a living, but not all there was to a life? I don't recall passing any camel clothed prophets on the highway, but maybe I was learning that peace, love, and joy come on their own terms and are not just ours to acquire, however, hard we try to work at achieving them.

In fact, sometimes the more we think it is all up to us, the more elusive such states of being become. I don't care how efficient Amazon becomes or how full our calendar or how efficient our lifestyle becomes, John the Baptist is here to warn us that we cannot manufacture Christmas no matter how hard we try, how earnest we become, how spiritually regimented we train ourselves. Christmas comes on its own terms. Peace, love, comfort, come on their own terms. Christ comes on his own terms. And thankfully, his grace is more generous, more room-making and hospitable, than all our prayers, preparations, and predictions could ever have hoped.

The world, the kingdom, the Christmas John the Baptist is preparing us for is one that believes a methodical path to progress can only get us so far. The world, the kingdom, the Christmas John the Baptist is preparing us for is one that believes that we cannot consume our way into making Christmas happen no matter how right the gift, no matter how photogenic the card, no matter how many services we attend on Christmas eve (if you go in the morning and afternoon and evening, you get the special trifecta). Christmas comes, it just doesn't come on a methodical, progressive, let's measure it out and dollop it out trajectory. Christmas comes when our plate is full and we don't think we have time for it. Christmas comes when our plate is empty and we had just about giving up praying for it to come at all. Christmas comes when we had nearly inoculated ourselves to it and had given up on peace, love, and joy, and had just settled for incremental progress, success, and accomplishment

as the only point of life. Christmas comes to those who have tasted power, success, and accomplishment and who realize they still feel empty. Christmas comes to those who have fallen from power, fallen in and out of success, whose accomplishments have unraveled around them. The Christmas John the Baptist is preparing us for, is very equal opportunity, even in its unpredictability, it brings good tidings, it brings comfort and joy, it brings justice and peace, to the worthy and unworthy alike, the successful and the failures, the true believers and the unbelievers, the righteous and the never adequate enough. I wish I could tell you how to set your timer for it, but it doesn't discriminate based on our timetables. It can come in the quiet on the walk home in the cold night air with the songs of carols still ringing in our ears. It can come through a glimmer in the eye, an embrace from someone long estranged, it can come from a phone call from an old friend, a word of hope and encouragement from someone you never expected would be praying for you.

Several weeks ago, during Thanksgiving break, we had the opportunity to worship back in Scotland at our old church home there. The congregation there was a center city congregation and in it there was an older gentleman, who lived by himself in poverty housing, who smelled like he rarely bathed, but who always showed up for worship in his Sunday best, including his kilt. We also had a midweek service on Wednesdays and he always came then and there was one kind member of the congregation who would always pack an extra lunch and prepare an extra sandwich and would discreetly send him on his way with a little lunch he could take with him after the service. Then, but I am not sure about now, we always would have communion, not only by intinction, but with a common cup. And we would stand in a large circle passing the cup of wine around and not wanting to be on the wrong side of this particular person sharing from the common cup.

Ten years later, back in the same church, I saw him from a distance, and then at the end of the day when we were out walking on the streets of the city, I saw him again, slowly making his way home, as the light at the end of the day began to fade. He was moving even slower, an impediment to most of the passers by, and like John the Baptist, not the stuff of Advent or Christmas cards. Or is he? One of the traditions I was fond of in the UK churches was lessons and carols on Christmas Eve, just like here, but also a service mid-morning on Christmas day, after which there would be mulled wine and minced pies. One of the reasons I liked it was because whether Christmas day was a frenzied family time of pajamas and excited children or it was a more quiet affair at home or it was a big lunch or a quiet time watching Christmas programming, everyone had a place to go for that Sunday

service and everyone got some minced pie and mulled wine. When we were far from home, far from family, we had our Christmas day family at those services. And inevitably our friend from the streets would be there. As I saw him this past time, ten years later, older, more decrepit, more fragile than before, I realized how helpless I was as I walked by him and recognized him on his walk home. I couldn't follow him up with him; he probably did not even know who I was; I couldn't fix his life as if I knew exactly what needed fixing. But for a moment, I was thankful to recognize him and to know he was still a creature of his routine as long as he could be of service to God; and that on Christmas day, no matter what else was happening in the world and in his life, he would be gathered in the warmth of a loving Christian community with something good and festive to eat and a glass of something to warm his heart. Even if his paths or mine were not all straight yet, I could see Christmas coming, for him for sure, and in that moment, maybe for me, too.