

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday December 8 2019, Advent 2A
Text: Matthew 3: 1-12, John the Baptist's
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Theme: Repent with Joy

*It is the second Sunday of Advent for those of you keeping track. It means that we are halfway through our Advent journey, halfway done with our waiting for Christmas, for Christ to be born in a hovel at Bethlehem, for God to scandalously put on flesh becoming one of us, to share our life. All around us there is a flurry of activity to get ready for this Holy Day turned holiday and none of us is immune to its seductions. But the truth is that the church with its strange sense of time is in no hurry to get to Christmas. The old ways of Advent intend to teach us that the journey to Nativity is just as important as the infant's cry in the manger. What we need is to pay attention, to take stock of our lives. Our Christmas lists are clues to a deeper mystery. Our lists might grow into self-reflection, an unexpected entry in our journals. What do I really need? What do I really want? Is what I need something that can be bought? Can my loved ones, so full of good intentions really meet the need inside of me that cries out for wilderness, for the wildness of God, for singleness of heart, for a sense of the kingdom's nearness?

This is one of my favorite Sunday's as it is dedicated to the wild-man-prophet, John the Baptist. Johnny B for those of you on more intimate terms, who count him among your odd and devoted friends. I think we ought to call this Sunday wilderness Sunday. In fact, we ought to celebrate it outdoors as close to the Rio Grande River as we dare to get, wading up to our knees in mud, drinking in the Sandias and staring wildly into the eyes of each other searching for hints and clues of where the newness of the kingdom is arriving.

John the Baptist suddenly appears in the desert of Judea, "out of nowhere." We are not told how he got there so his sudden and disruptive presence moves our minds toward mystery. The very place of his appearance is an opening into that mystery. The desert is outside the city, outside the circle of the village and its knowing. It is a place, spiritual seekers go to confront their inner demons and beasts, to simplify the lives, purify their minds and get back to the core essentials. As Lawrence of Arabia said, "The desert is clean."

The climate of the desert goes along nicely with John's activity of purifying. He baptizes people, washes them off of all the burdens they have and pulls them out of the river into freshness and new life. He pushes them down, down into the waters and pulls them out ready for the sky and a new way of being.

He lives the words of the prophet Hosea:

*So I will allure her:
I will lead her into the desert
And speak to her heart.*

This is it, the simple and profound mission of John, to lead the heart to the place where God will speak.

Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is Johnny B’s message; it is his heart leading that is called repentance or *metanoia*. Repentance or *metanoia* carries a double meaning of changing your mind along with your actions. It is a kind of inner transformation that opens one up to the possibility of the Kingdom of God. As one theologian described, “it signals a need to go beyond your preset mindset and allow a new mindset to drive new actions.”-

Matthew likens him to the prophets of old, in fact he says that he is the one Isaiah spoke of, “The Voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” John’s preaching emerges out of his desert purification, and his cry is one that goes out from his heart to all hungry hearts. He is not a quiet messenger but an impassioned and powerful one. He invites people to look deep inside themselves and announces the coming of something new. John believes that there is a promise at the center of repentance. -

John’s message is the core message of Advent. Repentance is not an end in itself. It is a first step along the path to spiritual growth and fulfillment. It is a letting go in order to receive something better. It is the arduous task of clearing the path, eliminating obstacles, giving up excuses for the arrival of what is truly desired. John knows one thing very clearly, that the way to human flourishing is through the desert of self-confrontation and this fires his message and preaching.

Johnny was an odd-looking man dressed in camel’s hair accessorizing with leather, the same get-up that the prophet Elijah had sported just 800 years earlier. Evidently this look never goes out of style. John was un-kept, wild, offensive, blunt, hairy, water-loving, intense, sinewy, fierce, uncouth, and seemed a bit angry really (and anger sometimes makes us uncomfortable). John was a messenger, a prophet and sent by God. So, people came to hear his message, to enter the waters of the Jordan River to be taken under the water by this wild-man whose baptismal liturgy had not been approved by anyone, not the chief priests, not the Pharisees, not the Romans, not the adult Sunday School committee. And still they came, making their way from the comfortable confines of Jerusalem and the beautiful temple there full of sagacious priests to this out of the way, austere, riverbank in the wilderness presided over by the wild prophet of God.

What made Johnny B. so compelling, that he drew crowds into the wilderness to hear his demanding message? I suspect “repent,” is not a word we are especially fond of. We associate the word with doom-saying prophets on street corners wielding large floppy bibles like swords of accusation. Repent is one of those words you feel like someone needs to say with a boney finger pointed right at you.

But I wonder, is John’s message all that scary? Do we really understand the word Repent? Repent simply means to turn around, to go a different direction, to change course. Fredrick Buechner says it beautifully, “*To repent is to come to your senses. “It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, “I’m sorry,” than to the future and saying “Wow!”*” (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking A Theological ABC*, Harper & Row, 1973).

John's message of Repentance was simple but it hit home with a great number of people. John took his message to the outback of Judea. For Johnny B. "location, location, location" meant don't make it easy for them, if it is worth having, they will go to the trouble to get there. And people did just that. They packed a lunch, picked up trekking poles at REI and made the hike out to encounter John's strange preaching. They took a few days off work and made their way to hear the madman of God and undergo the odd ritual cleansing that no rabbi had approved.

Those who went to hear John were not disappointed. He was wild-eyed and uncivilized. He seemed like a person from another time, speaking a foreign language. But what he preached struck a nerve, he told of one who was coming, one who had incredible power of fire and spirit. John was a bit short on the details. He didn't tell people that someone's name. He didn't know what he would look like. But John was able to communicate something that stirred the hearts of his listeners deeply – the old ways were about to give way to something new; the old world was yielding to a new world. This "One" who was coming God's chosen one, would initiate this new world, this kingdom of God would somehow come near in this person.

The way John prepared people for this newness, the way he made the paths straight, lifted up the valleys and shaved down the mountains was by inviting people into the waters of the Jordan. He pulled them away from their well-established protections and their familiar routines. People from all walks of life came to listen to John's message because it was fresh, hope-filled and expectant. But they also came because of what he offered them – an opportunity to make adjustments with God, to come clean, to stop pretending, quit playing games and start over. All of this was symbolized and made real by the baptism that John offered right there in the wilderness in front of God and the curious crowds. John simply invited them into the living waters of the Jordan and washed them off. He didn't seem to have many rules about how it was to be done or who could come. There was no choir and no fresh towels at the hotel lobby. But people who gave themselves to John's baptism came away saying things like, "I can't really explain it but I feel alive again, awake for the first time in years." In fact, John's baptismal policies were a bit scandalous. John's baptism was open to anyone: women, outsiders, religious elites, dead-beats, lawyers, housewives, skeptics, the-too-cool-for-religion-types, athletes, mystics and engineers. John's baptism broke all the religious rules and for that he was both hated and loved, but even the religious of the day could not stay away so compelling was his message. John was hard on the religious types, especially the smug entitled ones who work like hell to convince others of their innate goodness and piety. He called them playful names like "You bunch of snakes," or "you fruitless trees, I've got an ax waiting for you," or "you all are like white washed tombs." John demanded that people confront the truth about themselves, get real about all that blocks them from God and neighbor. John would not abide the poison of externalism. For the jaded insiders who were game to comply ritually but their hearts remained untouched he had harsh words. He was looking for changed hearts not a ritual bath. He was fierce about people doing the hard work of inner change. No amount of good breeding, special status, higher education, or large portfolios could exempt you from the deep need of repentance.

John gave all who came a bath of newness, his own custom method for saying wake up, repent, turn, step lively so you do not miss the new thing God is doing right now, in front of your very eyes and within your softened hearts.

“The gospel always begins with a messenger, whether it is an angel whispering into Mary’s ear or a parent telling a child a story or a skinny prophet standing knee-deep in a river” (Barbara Brown Taylor). John is a messenger who stirs our hearts by yearning, leaning toward something better that is difficult to put into words. He can only say, the kingdom of God has come near and “one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.”

For John wilderness and humility were both important. First you needed to be willing to leave your comfortable life behind and head out into the wilderness to catch a glimpse of this newness so that when it arrived you might recognize it. God is not confined to temples or churches. John’s wilderness adventure was meant to clear the mind, purify the heart and open the nostrils to the scent of the kingdom. So, the movement away from the familiar to the unknown, the risk-taking of the spirit is important to John. My guess is that you have a pretty good idea where your personal wilderness is, the place you’d rather avoid, the place of fear and self-doubt you struggle with day in and day out: The grief you hold on to like a blanket that keeps you from stepping out of the past into a new life, the failure of a relationship that holds you under so that you can hardly breath, the mountains of resentment that have piled up in your life making you harsh and brittle, the hidden hatred and cruelty that you can’t seem to release, the nagging doubts that you don’t matter to God. The story of Johnny B. assures us that it is precisely in that wilderness, our wilderness, in confronting our dark waters that discovering the newness of the kingdom awaits.

In biblical theology the heart is the image for the center of the person. The heart is the place where one is both open to God and ready to act on that openness. The heart is the place that keeps spiritual life flowing and the spiritual person alive. It’s not an accident that we say someone is hard hearted or open hearted. To be open-hearted is to be open to conscious contact with God and to have the flow of that energy at the center of your life. It is from the heart that the deepest contact with God and our neighbor is made. Therefore, repentance means going beyond our mind and embracing our hearts, allowing them to be open and alive to God.

But how will we get to our hearts? How can we begin to live out of our spiritual center?

The desert will lead us there, especially the person who lives in the desert will lead us there. His methods are rigorous. He knows that our hearts are camouflaged by self-deceptions and that we are skilled in avoidance. But the voice of one crying in the wilderness is fierce about making us look at ourselves. He knows that there is something infinitely better than our present ways of deception. But in order to get there, one must let go of so much that holds us back, let go of the chatter of the mind that holds us back. Repentance is the way.

Repentance begins by entering the desert, this is what John teaches us. To be in the desert is to be off by one’s own in solitude. It is here in solitude that one can do some inner work, and until we do this inner work, we are always one-sided creation of other people’s expectations and demands of us. The desert is a place where we can begin to examine our lives and to claim who we are in our God-given personhood. The desert can free us from a life that may be safe, well-respected, even well-rewarded life but a life that is not truly our own. Every one of us needs to purify and simplify to discover what is essential, to consider where we have been and where we are going.

The genuine urge to repent is an expression of our desire to be real, to be conscious and aware of our true and ultimate grounding in God.

Why do people come to John and submit to his harsh words and tactics? Why do we continue to journey into the desert? We sense something new there, we sense the promise of repentance, the promise to move beyond half-heartedness and delusion, to promise to be authentic and real, the promise that will lead us to our heart.

*So I will allure her:
I will lead her into the desert
And speak to her heart.*

John was certain that being open to newness was not a posture we easily embrace. People do not seek out newness all that often, in fact we humans are often rather hide-bound and predictable. John struck the chord of repentance rather forcefully. The wild-man prophet of God invited anyone and everyone to consider repentance as a way of life and to make it real, he offered them the experience of baptism. In this humble act, John the Baptist offered, a new pattern of life, the humble willingness to let go and get into the cleansing river, lowered into the water clinging to the old life, and raised up into a new possibility for the future. It was a nearly perfect act for a new beginning, a hopeful humility that is the posture of everyone who is waiting for something new.

So, this day, if you can hear the sounds of one crying out to you from the wilderness, don't be afraid to make the journey out there. And if it is true that, like those who came to hear John the Baptist preach, you are desiring something better, something more from life than you have, take that as a good sign, as the scent of faith and hope within you. And don't be afraid, be willing to hold the things of your life, even the good things of life, lightly, so that you can let them go if for a moment they are getting in the way of Christ's new way for you. Advent is about opening your hands and heart to receive the newness that John sensed coming and that is always coming into the world. For the coming of Christ goes on forever and in our midst, there is always an Advent going on (Jean Danielou). So put repentance on your Christmas list. And repent with joy, for the kingdom has come near.