

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS (Mark 1:1-8)

How many of you remember the oldie “Abraham, Martin and John”? It dates back to 1968 and was a tribute to Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, and Bobby Kennedy. The first three verses starts with a question, and the question in verse three is: “Has anyone here seen my old friend John?”

That’s a question we might be asking this morning. Has anyone here seen our old friend John the Baptist?

John shows up like clockwork every Advent, always on the second and third Sunday of the season. And then he disappears for another year.

I, for one, won’t miss him. John is a hard character to warm up to. He seems to have been a cantankerous, curmudgeonly sort of guy. He wasn’t on many holiday party guest lists. He could throw a wet blanket on anyone’s good time.

So isn’t it odd that Mark begins his gospel, his “good news,” with John the Baptist?

It’s been said that before the gospel can be good news, it first has to be bad news. And that’s sure the case with John. There’s not much in his preaching that sounds like good news.

By this second Sunday in Advent, the Christmas season is in high gear. We’ve had Black Friday and Cyber Monday. The trees are up, the Christmas lights are blazing, Santa’s at the mall, Christmas parties are in full swing, Christmas cards and letters are in the mail, and we’ve heard “Jingle Bells” till we can’t get it out of our heads.

At the risk of sounding a bit like John the Baptist myself: that’s not what Advent is all about. It’s not the run-up to Christmas or the season for counting down the number of days left to get all the shopping done. The church maintains that Christmas is still a faint glow on the horizon, a promise foretold, a hope longed for.

Amid all the tinsel and trappings of Christmas, John the Baptist is nowhere to be found. Angels and shepherds and wise men and little drummer boys show up. They’re safe, friendly, ...and marketable. There’s no way, though, to clean John the Baptist up and make him presentable enough to be on the cover of a Hallmark card. John’s pushing repentance, and let’s be honest: repentance doesn’t sell so well in the weeks before Christmas, not at the mall and not in most of our churches.

“Repent!” isn’t a message we like to hear. It’s not a regular part of our vocabulary. It sounds harsh and judgmental. And besides, we’re not all that bad to begin with. There’s no shortage of preachers who are a bit more comforting than John the Baptist, whose message isn’t “Repent!” but some variation on “I’m OK, You’re OK” or “Jesus loves you just the way you are.”

Well of course Jesus loves us just the way we are. That's what grace is all about, and it's pretty good news. But there's even better news: Jesus loves us too much to leave us just the way we are. That's not just good news, that's the best news.

Can any of us honestly and soberly look at our life and say that we are all that we can be, that we are living the life and walking the path that we should be, that there's absolutely nothing we need to change?

I don't really know very many people who are bold enough to make a claim like that – that they are just as good as they were created to be. Most people who are honest and spiritually connected know that God created them for something more. They may not know exactly what that "more" is, but they're looking in some sense to repent, to turn around, which is what repentance really means; they're looking to be pointed in a new direction.

One of the things that makes repentance so hard is the fact that we're caught up in a system whose values are light years apart from God's values. And that's never more apparent than in Advent. Advent has come to be more or less synonymous with "Christmas shopping season." The church has gone along and allowed the market to set the terms and define the season. Yes, we hear pleas to "keep Christ in Christmas" and "remember the reason for the season." But they fall on deaf ears and we don't push back too hard. Commercialism is in the driver's seat.

So maybe it's a good thing that John the Baptist makes his annual appearance and demands our attention.

John the Baptist is a popular figure in Christian art. And he's usually shown pointing a long, scrawny finger at the audience. But maybe it's not an accusatory gesture. Maybe he's motioning us to come closer. Maybe John knows what we forget in the busyness of December holiday life: that our lives aren't as clean as we may think they are, that we aren't as good as we would like others to believe, that we need a cold bath in the Jordan to wash away our pretenses and remind us that the cuddly baby Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Mark tells us that people flocked out into the wilderness to hear John's message. It's 20 hot, dusty miles from Jerusalem to the Jordan River. It took an effort to get there to hear John. It was more than curiosity that drove them. Harsh as John's message sounds to us, people wanted to hear it.

And they wanted to hear it because beneath the harangue they heard a message of hope, a message that promised something beyond their humdrum daily existence. They heard a message that promised a new day dawning, a new world coming into existence. That was the good news. That was the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.

There's a reason John went to the desert to proclaim this good news. It was partly symbolic. The desert is a place where things are reduced to bare essentials, trimmed down to the basics. By inviting people out into the desert, John was inviting them to leave behind much of their usual trappings and bring only what was really important.

And that's where the symbolic merges into the practical. Back in Jerusalem – back in any city – there are simply too many distractions for a message like John's to be heard, too many other voices, too many other demands, too many barriers for the message to burrow through.

Advent's not a long season, in any case. There are only a couple of weeks left. But there's still time to set our sights on the wilderness of our broken world, the wilderness of our broken dreams, the barren wilderness that can only be filled by the Christ-child's grace.

If we hope to find God in this Advent season, it helps to get away from the crowds, to leave behind some of our baggage, to go someplace where life is reduced to the essentials. It's not easy. It calls for repentance – from turning away from the old to embrace the new.

John is already there, in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord. And he's calling us to join him.