

## PREPARE AND WAIT

**TEXT:** Mark 1:1-8

I have always been fascinated by John the Baptist. He's really a complex individual. The Gospels tell us that he was the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, a relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus. But we hear nothing more until he appears coming from the wilderness looking like a wild man, wearing clothing of camels hair and shouting to the world to "Prepare!!" I've always been curious about what motivated John to live a life of austerity, living on locusts and honey, and disappearing until it was time for him to announce the coming of the Messiah.

John is a strange man; he's not the kind of holiday guest most people would care to have at their parties. John is shrill. He's given to dramatic gestures. He'd probably spill eggnog all over someone's nice Persian rug as he waved his arms through the air, urging people to take stock, to straighten up and fly right before the face of God.

John reminds us that Christmas is not a serene season of light and goodness. John reminds us that if we don't greet the Savior with repentance, contrition, and a sincere desire to change our ways, then the Savior we meet may well have some unpleasant things to say to us.

In Mark's gospel, first John and then Jesus simply appear, walking straight out of the heat waves rising up from the desert floor. In his opening sentence Mark writes: "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the son of God". It's not even a complete sentence – it's a title. This is Mark's beginning – not in a stable, not in a manger, but out in the desert, of all places.

In our reading today, John is portrayed as a prophet. Not just any prophet, however, but the great prophet Elijah whose return would signal the coming of the Messiah. Prophets are interesting people and sometimes we struggle to understand just what they are all about. What do prophets do? Prophets are truth-tellers, at least when it

comes to the Old Testament. They are not fortune-tellers, not forecasters of the future, not doomsday prognosticators. They are only predictors of what is to come if that future makes sense because of or due to present behavior. They are analyzers of the "now" for the sake of moving toward a different future.

Truth-tellers are essential, but not very popular. We remember the famous words of Gloria Steinem: "The truth will set you free, but first it will really piss you off".

Telling someone the truth or being told the truth is an exercise in looking into a mirror. You're forced to see what you'd rather not see, have chosen to disregard, or pretend you are not.

Today's words from Mark on this second Sunday of Advent need to be about truth telling. Now more than ever, we live in a world where lying is considered acceptable, especially if it advances a cause that may not enjoy universal popularity.

We need to be truthful about the incarnation. We sentimentalize the time of Advent, even Christmas, with the saccharine story about shepherds and sheep and an adorable baby in a manger. But we all know the truth about cute little babies. They are hard work. And to be human means really hard stuff. God deciding to become human means that God committed God's self to everything that it means to be human - joy but also the desperate need for comfort; anxiety but also the radical presence of peace; postponement but also the security of promise.

John wants us to think about confession. It's a ghastly business in our culture. It's like pouring a bucket of ice water over our own heads. And it's something the powerful and the criminal squander wealth and power to avoid doing.

Think of all those NCIS shows, in which a team of able detectives, armed with the latest technology and forensic investigation, use their expertise, their talented noses for smelling rats, their valor and fitness for combat, all to bring criminals to confession.

Think of Bill Clinton, putting the whole country through agony while he tried to parse the meaning of "is" in an impeachment hearing.

Think of Donald Trump, who in one year as President has become known as the Liar in Chief, as he tweets a daily stream of falsehoods.

Think of Charlie Rose, who was sure he saw consent twinkling in the eyes of women on his payroll (who were half a century younger than he was) when he slipped into his bathrobe.

Think of Congressman Conyers, who has checked himself into the hospital to avoid confessing to office sexual harassment, for which he paid hush money. At 88, he is insisting on his innocence, wanting his laudatory accomplishments to somehow inoculate him against his sins. Think of the taxpayer dollars that were used to provide that inoculation. But who can forgive what remains unconfessed?

Think of Roy Moore. Al Franken. Matt Lauer. Harvey Weinstein. The list goes on...and on.

And then hear the word of God: *"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you..."*

And Mark tell us: *then John the baptizer appeared, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for sin.* Repentance for sin - what a novel idea! And coming from the likes of one such as John. The people from the whole countryside around Judea were going out into the wilderness to be baptized by him. He doesn't fit on the stage of religious leaders. He's not meek. He's not winsome. He rants. He's uncombed and unkempt and he eats locusts. Yuck!

Before John, the messengers of God have always been angels. Always, always. And they look like - well, you know. No, wait. We don't know, not from the Bible anyway. We know the iconography of medieval paintings, angels wearing robes, mostly

white, with wings, halos - and all this is based on - God knows what.

So, could John the Baptist be an angel? Is this what angels look like? It's what this messenger of God looked like, so it must be angelic. Wow! And who are these people who flock out to this messy, wild guy, and willingly confess their sins? Clearly, they are not Americans. At least American politicians. For we are the people who are sure we're not wrong. We make mistakes. We do not commit sins. We're sure the charges are exaggerated, and our memories are, however many we may have, regrettable, hurt you, you consented. We're good people, really.

But yet, the Word is that the only road that leads to Christmas begins with confession. With a heartfelt contrition that we are not the people we have pretended to be, that we have sinned and sinned and sinned some more. Gosh, that is really in-American. We always have counselors available to deal with our grief and despair, so that we will not feel this way. We maintain our self-esteem, with lawyers, denials, meticulous parsing of the situation, and, if need be, with a few remedial prayers.

Advent allows Jesus to enter into the entirety of our humanness, our sin. But by sin, I do not mean our so-called personal depravity, unworthiness, questionable morality. I get a little weary about those assumptions and definitions of sin. Rather, Jesus enters into the powers that perpetuate sin, the nations that nurture sin, and the structures that situate sin as justifiable. Jesus comes to take them on by telling the truth and being the truth – the truth that names our own compliance, our own conformity, and our acquiescence to the kind of sin that tolerates inequity, and believes we have “gotten past” the –isms that exclude and excuse, that insist on the protection of institutional ideologues thereby rationalizing acts of dehumanization.

So, what kind of waiting – and preparing – are we going to do? Sure, we can sit around and wait for Christmas, or Christ's return, for that matter. Or we can get in the game, see how we can spend our time, energy, wealth and lives making a difference *right now*. Because it is not just John who is called to cry out and prepare the way. It's all of

us. Right here, right now, waiting *actively*, if you will, by making a difference in the lives of the people God has put all around us. God is continuing the story of the good news of Jesus in and through our words and actions and each of us will have a hundred and one opportunities this very week to contribute to that sacred story, to make it come alive, to help God keep God's promises here and now.

No. what we do will not bring ultimate healing or comfort or peace or justice. That's God's job...and God will keep God's promises to the fullest in the fullness of time. But we don't have to wait for that passively, but are invited to throw ourselves into that venture both trusting God's promises and living them right here, right now. It's just the beginning, and the story continues to unfold both around us and through us. It's time to prepare. Amen