

An Advent Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

“Repent”

Mark 1: 1-8

December 4, 2005

The story that is our Good News always begins with a messenger... there is someone. An angel whispering in a young maiden's ear or into someone's dream... or to a would-be parent... praying in a temple. In John, there's a poet, a mystical poet weaving beautiful, lofty words. There is always someone who seems to be introducing the story, giving the world a gospel “heads-up.”

In Mark, it is this “bug-eatin’,”

Pulpit-poundin’

Sinner-dunkin’

Strange lookin’ ...

Smelly, bizarre prophet we know as John the Baptist.

If you were in any first century living room, hearing the beginning of this gospel read as a Jewish Christian (and do bear in mind you would have heard it, not read it yourself... the gospels were an auditory experience)... If you heard it you would lean forward... There would be messianic alarms sounding in you and in everyone else in the room.

This language and these images are familiar. So like a VBS Vet hearing John 3:16, when a first century Jewish Christian heard about a voice in the wilderness preparing a way and making a path straight she would lean forward.

This is the language of her faith and then when she hears these words coming from this weird, Elijah-like, camel-clothed prophet, she knows that **“The day of the Lord is at hand.”** They always knew Elijah would make a come back for the great event. (Michael Parsons, The Storyteller's Companion)

And here he is out in the desert, of all places, and any good Jew knows that God's deliverance always begins there. Exodus and exile... you've got to go into and through the desert. And that's where this prophet has set up shop.

John was a mess and lots of folks were worried he would make a mess. Josephus, the historian, wrote about him also and concurs with the gospel accounts that Herod was really nervous about his popularity and all the commotion he was causing.

So, according to Josephus, before John could get any real rebellious traction going, he arrested him and executed him. (Michael Parsons, The Storyteller's Companion)

John was not so popular with some folks but according to Mark, who was real popular with others, **“The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to see him.”**

Some of them, just rubbernecking, I suspect.

Some of them, just curious...

Or just looking for something entertaining to do on the weekend.

But lots of them went for other, more significant reasons. They went into the desert for something they couldn't find in the city.

Which is kind of strange because Jerusalem has everything, you know, spiritually speaking... Hot and cold running religion... the temple open 24/7... wisdom delivered to your doorstep. Everything you need... anything a soul might need or want was in Jerusalem.

Or maybe it wasn't... why else would all these folks head out into the desert... nasty, hot, dangerous old desert... to hear someone who was giving them hell. Why would they skip church and their favorite rabbi's nice, easy to outline lesson, to go hear this guy.

Flannery O'Connor said, **"You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd."** John knows the truth and...

John is odd... painfully odd...

He is eccentric... out on the edge...

He isn't in the center.

But maybe there comes a time when the center just doesn't do it for you anymore. The safety of it... "the same ole' same ole'" of it... the vanilla, benign-ness of going through the motions and playing all the roles and living on the surface.

Does there come a time when playing roles grows thin... And going through the motions of what it means to be you, makes you nauseous?

Does there? ... come a time when half-truth isn't enough? You've had just enough religion all along to inoculate you... and nothing's really phasing you anymore?

Does there come a day when you say, **"life in the safe center isn't enough."** When you say, **"faith delivered up by the authorities down at the temple won't do... borrowed faith."**

Does there? ... come a time when you realize how much you've been pretending?

Something in us longs for what is real and authentic. And we try to find it in what life hands us... Some of this and that...

A career...

A philosophy...

Some relationships...

The 1-2 of our faith.

And as good as that all can be, there comes a day of reckoning... where we know we can't get to the authentic without looking elsewhere...deeper or maybe outside... out there.... in the desert where that weird guy is shouting about the Lord coming.

Where things are confrontive... and where we are vulnerable. Mark says the gospel of Jesus begins there.

In the desert, Mark says later, that in the desert is where the "wild beasts" are. There are things to face about yourself in the desert. It's a risky place.

And that is scary... but isn't it also sort of inviting.

Because there's something about the chance to come clean that is appealing. Ever done that? Stepped into some confessional and spilled it all? I'd be willing to bet, there are dark rooms in the castle of who you are that only you know about...

And I'd be willing to bet you'd love to come clean.

So maybe that's why they're all flocking out to hear John. He's not the "same ole' same ole'" and he's holding out the promise that they don't have to be either. Something authentic might happen... so they go.

And when they do, John invites them down into the water where he is offering a baptism of repentance. Wading into the Jordan with John was to say, "**I repent.**"

Repent... metanoia... It means a change of the mind. So, it's not about groveling in guilt... it's not about just getting your moral failures out on the table... and your ethical ducks in a row.

It's about a transformation... a reorientation of your inner mind. Metanoia... isn't about your opinions or your theology or your thinking either. It's about your inner being... your center... the nous, as scripture calls it. Meta noia-change the nous-change the center.

And its orientation was here, to this or that, but it's time for metanoia... repentance... so that this core of who you are finds another orientation... It's "true North."

When person after person waded out to meet John, they were turning towards something and away from something else. And it was a crowd like any crowd, with folks whose hearts were centered on so many things... like this crowd is.

Someone wades out into the water whose life was centered in possession... in the material... like most of ours are. We are what we have.

They stood in line... and there was someone there whose entire self was about being in control... being right... and he's so tired of that so he's in the line and some of us would like to join him.

There's a woman with her hand up... and the center for her has been the past and the failures there. She's turning away from all that guilt that has controlled her so and she's at the Jordan saying, "**Me... baptize me... I'm repenting.**" And some of us would really like to go under with her.

There is a big group of folks there... repenting for their small, selfish lives. The world has been only as big as their own backyards... the human family only as large as in their family trees... These folks are repenting... changing their inner focus and turning away from such small lives.

There are folks from all over...

Turning away from fears...

Turning away from destructive patterns...

From dead ways of life...

From comparison... condemnation...

Turning away from the hatred of...Romans, of Greeks, of Herodians, of one another of... what is inside them. Back in Jerusalem they woke up everyday with it. Wishing they could be something else... angry at their own limitations and their weakness. Now with a hand raised...

Baptize me. Mark says the gospel begins there-"Baptize me, I'm tired of this."

And John does... but not without telling them that this is just the beginning. His Baptism is just a way to help them say, "yes" to what is to come... It's a yielding to

something new... it's preparation for reality. It isn't reality. Just a form for it... maybe a cooperation with it.

“There's another coming... and this One will Baptize you with Spirit.”

How about that? John puts them under the water... they come clean and then come up clean. Jesus will put them under the Spirit. He's going to immerse them down into what is essential.

Back they'll go, in trust and vulnerability...

Down they'll go, underneath... yielded.

And Spirit will pour in over them. All around them. Enclosing them until all they are is surrounded by and filled with Spirit.

John baptizes with water... Jesus will baptize with breath... that's what the word means. You will be baptized with the breath, the Life that is in him. You will be immersed in that... that is the promise and that is what we're preparing for.

It's something God does... Remember, these lines of prophecy are about God making a way to those who are in exile. They aren't home and God goes to get them to take them home.

All they can do is get ready to make the trip. All they can do is metanoia... reorient... repent.

I hope that will happen for you this season. It probably won't, remember, if you just hang around the temple and go through the seasonal motions... a little church, a little gift wrapping, a lot of pecan pie. You'll need to listen to a deeper longing for what is authentic.

It's in you... it's there. It's time... time to repent.

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