

Sermon Notes

What Are You Waiting For? A Powerful Role Model

The Second Sunday of Advent
December 4, 2016

The Reverend Mark Pruitt

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

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I took last Sunday off, the first time since 1992, if you can believe it, that I have not led a Lessons and Carols service on the first Sunday in Advent, and I really missed that. I almost came back here and sat in the balcony as a guest to participate. I was glad to hear such positive reviews of the music, which didn’t surprise me. But I took last Sunday off after a succession of fully booked weekends—the retreat at Salt Fork, the Diocesan Convention, weekends with weddings—to get refreshed. It’s easy to fall into ruts, patterns of repetition or cliché or routines that get stale. I was thinking, for instance, about the seeming fact that churches usually only hear sermons on Psalm 23 at funerals, though it wasn’t written for one. Churches hear sermons on 1 Corinthians 13, on love and patience, at weddings. Every marriage needs the wise counsel of that chapter, but it wasn’t written for weddings or primarily for couples. Those are ruts. And there is a rut that’s hard to avoid when we come to John the Baptist.

It’s the well worn path of emphasizing his oddness, his idiosyncrasies, his extremism. We make fun of his lifestyle. He lived alone. in the desert. He wore camel hair with a leather girdle. He ate locust and wild honey. So strange to us, and apparently, eccentric back then. These are thoughts I was pondering in my office when I was interrupted

About this publication: Many have asked for written copies of our sermons. *Sermon Notes* is a response to that request from one of our preachers, Mark Pruitt. These notes that: the written notes, typed in advance of the sermon that shape the sermon eventually delivered—usually with some divergence, condensation, or expansion, from this written form. Often the sermon may be quite different in outline and presentation from these notes, though not so much in content. Generally, these notes will be (ideally, anyhow) more polished and flowing as befits written expression, while the sermon will aim, as it should, for more connectivity through personal address. In either form, our sermons at St. Paul’s strive to promote wise reflection on biblical themes and texts, issue calls to discipleship and intentional growth in God’s grace and mission, and embody the confidence (even when it sometimes takes the form of questioning and searching) that God speaks to us in the here and now.

by a text from a staff member asking for a meeting. Sure, I texted back, come on in. When he came to my office, he said, “You looked like you were in deep thought.” I told him I was trying to figure out John the Baptist. His immediate reply? “John the Baptist was smelly!” Well, he probably was! But that only confirmed my hunch that to focus on John’s oddness is to miss something essential to the biblical narrative and, for us, for life in Christ.

The contemporary relevance of John the Baptist is not primarily to let his oddness comfort us when the world looks at us as odd (though there may be *something* in that). No John’s relevance for you and for me is far more challenging. What stands out to me is his courage and (to use another “c” word or two, the clarity he has, or the conviction, about his role to promote Christ’s glory and not his own.

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Let’s think about courage first. When is the last time you heard a sermon on courage? When is the last time someone encouraged you to be strong, or as the Scriptures put it, to be ‘strong in the Lord’ or ‘steadfast in God?’ My perception (and I could be wrong about this) is that we do a good job of extending genuine sympathy to others in grief or loss; that we exercise empathy in listening to those struggling in some way; and that we show real compassion. I think this is true of the staff here, of the congregation, of bible studies I’ve been in with other clergy. I think it’s true of our age and culture in large measure. And all of these things—sympathy, empathy, compassion—are, I suppose, forms of encouragement, or have an encouraging effect.

But what about encouragement in its straightforward sense, straight-up, direct: Be strong! Be filled with courage! Face things with confidence. For John the Baptist to live out his life, for you, for me, to live our lives, we need courage. We need the strength of conviction and character, the confidence of purpose, in the face of adversity, or resistance, or even our own lethargy. Luke tells us that John the Baptist “grew and became strong.” He was courageous in public and, I would say, in private. In fact, it seems that John, like his Lord, became strong in solitude for the sake of his public ministry.

Here is a short list of the courageous things John did publically.

1. He called people to repent. Like Jesus, repent was one of the first, and most repeated words on the lips of John. It comes right at the beginning of his message, as it does with Jesus. We don’t talk about repentance in polite society, or of sin. We like to think that being human is simply a matter of being prone to mistakes, or bad manner, or bad taste. Hardly. The gospel is the most amazing news, when we think about it. It’s astonishingly good news, that we can be overwhelmed by peace, and love, and mercy straight from God and this can outdo all the bad overwhelmings like despair, and loneliness, and sin. It’s amazing news but before it’s good news, it’s bad news. It’s the news that we have a constitutional fault, that the ‘germ of all possible crimes is in us’ (S.Weil), that we can’t help but sin, and that we willfully take flight from God, the truth, and the command to love others. An unrelentingly truthful diagnosis preceded the cure. And it takes courage to say this. But John did.

John was tasked –as every preacher is—with telling people that God alone would be their salvation. Only God could do a new thing, usher in a transformation so

radical that a new nature would be planted in the hearts of men and women, so new that rebirth was a way of talking about it. The only way, and this had to be from God alone.

Caricatures may flood the mind at this point. Men screaming “Repent” on street corners, or wearing sandwich boards with religious messages, or chained to the White House fence. But repent means “turn around” or “think again.” It means “come to the truth” from “untruth.” And it can be just as effective when whispered, maybe more, than when shouted.

2. He confronted authorities, religious authorities who had corrupted the truth of God. And he confronted a corrupt king, Herod, who had taken the wife of his brother and was living in open rebellion against God and against basic decency. This would cost John his life: the women in Herod’s family plotted against John for his honesty. Herod actually liked John for his courage. But John called Herod, despite his outward power, weak on the inside. John is the ultimate profile in courage it seems, answering to God, because he was open to God.

These were some of the things that John did publically, but the real secret, and the real courage was John getting along with God. And that takes courage. It does. We can fill our time doing any number of things—good things, important things, as well as useless things, or wrong things—to avoid getting alone with God and dealing with what we know, in our heart of hearts, or what God knows, we need to deal with.

One time many years ago, in my small parish in Butler, Pennsylvania, I remember a young couple sitting in the pews and I remember the cuddling, and patting on the back, and the whispers all through the service by these two. I didn’t take it personally. I didn’t stare at them or, out of manners, walk out into the congregation and say, Stop! But I thought to myself: the greatest miracle in the world is happening here—the Creator and Redeemer speaking to His creatures....through the readings, the hymns, the liturgy, the sermon (I hoped) and they can’t stop to listen.

And I know what that is like. I have done many important things when the deep voice of my conscience has been saying go and pray, get to the chapel, open your Bible, open yourself or this problem to God. It takes courage to be alone, and to face God, face to face.

But John (along with the whole New Testament!) says Do It! Be strong enough to do it, and then draw on this through the day, and through all ones days.

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And last, though far from least, John is a role model by saying when Christ appears “Christ must increase, therefore, I must decrease.” He moves to the sideline, we might say, but not out of sight, but as a pointer to Christ. As someone who will live in the reflected glory of Christ. John “was not the light but he bore witness to the light that was coming into the world (John 1).” He made Christ’s glory his greatest concern. So did Mary when she said “my soul magnifies the Lord.” And Paul when he said “it is not we ourselves who we proclaim, but Christ Jesus.” John and Mary and Paul each use their own words, but can you see the family resemblance? Each one of them deflects the attention away from themselves. Each one lives to promote a greater reality: Christ

Jesus. And we belong to the same family, so we should make it our aim to glorify Christ.

Again, we may fear the caricatures: religious, religious extremism, Jesus freak. But really most of glorifying Christ will take the form of how we live in the mundane, ordinary relationships and activities that make up our lives. When we, in solitude, repent or give something to God that no one else may ever know about, it can be a glorifying of Christ. When we refuse to adopt patterns of life that are destructive to the creation or others or ourselves, that glorifies Christ. When we examine ourselves by asking is this or that thing I am doing my own power trip, or self-assertion, and not in line with the common good, an other's well-being, the will of God....that is glorifying Christ. And when we learn what seems like for many is a steep learning curve, when we learn to share with others what we understand Christ to be doing in our life, that is seeking his glory as a prime concern in life.

And it takes courage to do these things.

Conclusion

Neither your role nor mine will be to head to the desert and live in isolation. But we are summoned to get alone regularly with God to be made strong to face what you have to face, do what you have to do, and be who you are summoned to be. The same is true for me. Being made strong is not just inner resolve, though that is a big part of it. Being made strong is letting the living God, the living Christ, set the path for your inner life and your outer life. We see it happen in John, and it can happen with us. May we pray then for Christ to guide our inner life and outer steps by filling us with courage, real strength. May we take heart from, and think more often of, the good example of John the Baptist. Amen.

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