

Prepare the Way

An Advent Message Offered by

Rev. Jeffrey W. Gibelius
Pastor
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Second Presbyterian Church
528 Garland Drive
Carlisle, PA 17013
Worship: 8 & 10:30 a.m.
(717) 243-4571
www.GrowWithSecond.org

Prepare the Way

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God:

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Mark 1:1-8

Imagine John the Baptist at 20 years old: not exactly the kind of guy you want your daughter to bring home to meet you over Christmas vacation. First of all, he was, well, Baptist: a Scripture quoting, hell-fire and brimstone, *Southern* Baptist no less (he *was* from Judea after all). And his mother dressed him funny. Camel hair in the desert no less? Does that stuff breathe? To make things more weird, John was *vegan*. Can you see yourself saying, “Pot roast, John?” He replies, “No thanks, I filled up on locusts and honey before I came.” And then he smiles a big toothy grin, and you see the locust wing stuck between his teeth. (Though I guess technically a locust is a meat and not a vegetable). John would have done well on that old reality television show *Fear Factor*.

But not on *Survivor*. I can see him getting on people’s nerves real fast. He didn’t care whom he offended with his message. I imagine his Kindergarten teacher writing on his report card. “Sometimes Johnny scares the other children. He calls them a ‘brood of vipers.’ May need counseling.” John the Baptist was certainly a little different.

But the more you get to know him, the more you begin to see why people were drawn to him—in spite of his quirks. In fact, he’s a powerful role model for modern day disciples like you and me.

But first we have to get our facts straight.

John wasn’t Southern Baptist (and he certainly wasn’t Presbyterian), but he did come from the southern part of Israel, Judea, and he did do something with people in the waters of the Jordan River in a ritual that came to be known as “baptism.” Most likely John’s “baptism” was a variation of the Jewish bathing ritual for conversion and purification; so people wouldn’t have been completely unfamiliar with what he was doing. What *was* original to John was his insistence that not just Gentiles, but *even Jews by birth*, needed to convert to true Judaism. No one else proclaimed baptism *for the forgiveness of sins*.

John had a priestly pedigree and a strict religious upbringing. He was the much-awaited only child of a temple priest, Zechariah, and his wife, Elizabeth, who was a descendant of Aaron, the first High Priest. Because of this background we would expect his parents to have been particularly devout in the keeping of God’s law, including the kosher laws for food and clothing. But Luke tells us that John grew up in Judea’s harsh desert wilderness east of Jerusalem, a region where kosher delis were few and far between. In that locale the easiest way to keep kosher would be to live off the natural produce of the land; it just so happens that “insectarian” diet of honey and locusts made sense: they are both *kosher* foods. John’s cloak and belt also met the kosher laws, and they actually were very practical in the dry desert climate. So John’s manner of eating and dressing wasn’t as unusual as we might think. They are very plausible, given who he was and where he lived.

Although Jesus moved easily from the rural countryside of Galilee to the desert of Judea to the great city of Jerusalem and aback again, Jesus’ relative John (we aren’t told exactly how they were related) never left the wilderness that he grew up in. John didn’t stay there because the desert was particularly pleasant or closer to God; he stayed because it was further from the corruption of the capital city, Jerusalem. John stands out as the loudest voice in a large reform

movement that had one goal: a return to strict observance of God's law in Jerusalem. They felt that until Jerusalem, and especially the Temple, became pure once again, God would not liberate the people from the dreaded Roman occupation. So John fasted, abstained from alcohol, prayed regularly and taught his disciples to pray fervently (Yes, John had disciples, too). All this was consistent with what many other devout Jews were doing at the time.

In fact, John followed closely in the footsteps of Amos, Jeremiah, and most of all, Elijah. The fearless way John "spoke truth to power" and his status as an outsider from the desert reminded people of the great prophet Elijah who had lived hundreds of years before. Many people, when they heard what John was saying and doing, thought Elijah had returned: new person, same message.

And people flocked to hear that message. The Gospel writers tell us that "all of Jerusalem" came out to be baptized. Whether every last man, woman, and child did or not is beside the point: the bottom line is that John was popular. He had such a large and loyal following that he is mentioned in contemporary accounts *outside* the Gospels (see, e.g., *Josephus*). And we know from the Gospels that even King Herod knew who he was (and lived to regret it!)

Everyone was curious about John. Country people. City people. Pharisees. Saducees. Tax collectors. Prostitutes (whether they were temple prostitutes or not we don't know). Rich people. Poor people. Soldiers in Herod's army. He had the same harsh message for them all. "You're not as good as you think. You need to clean up your act, inside and out. It doesn't matter to God whether you're a priest, a prostitute or a pastor. You all need to convert--or repent—to a new way of being--*now*. And the way you start this new life is through this water."

Whether John totally immersed people in the river, splashed water on them, or poured a few drops on their heads, we'll never know. But it doesn't really matter, does it? What does matter is that people came forward for what he was offering. You might expect the tax collectors and prostitutes to come forward—everyone knew *they* needed new life. But even "good" people came forward to be baptized. They knew that John was speaking the truth, the painful truth, of their lives—they needed to start over.

I think this is the truth of our lives, too: even the best of us have a sin problem. The youngest, the oldest, the richest, the poorest—we all need to start over. Some days we see this more clearly than others.

Why was John so popular? I think it's because he spoke the truth plainly, without mincing words, at a time when people were desperate for truth. I think we live in a time like that. Fewer and fewer people take responsibility for their sinful acts. Ask someone if they are as good as they could be, and they'll be quick to say, "No." But ask them to get specific about what sins they have committed in the past week and they get tongue-tied: we live with a general sense of guilt, rather than a specific sense of responsibility.

Have you followed Tiger Wood's drama? Why didn't he just come out right away and say, "I was wrong and I did wrong to my wife and family." I would have respected him more for

simply admitting not just his *frailty* but his *sin*. And why didn't anyone in his circle of friends and advisors tell him that he was making a series of huge mistakes. Where was his John the Baptist?

Tiger Woods and you and I *need* a John the Baptist from time to time, someone who will tell us the truth, no matter how painful it is. There's no use in pretending that it's not going to snow if a storm is coming. John's the kind of guy who says "it's going to snow, and you're not nearly ready for it." We don't *like* his message, but we don't *doubt* it. It rings true. We know he has no reason to lie. We need John the Baptists to tell us when we're going 90 miles and hour down a dead-end street. But not many of us have that person.

I wonder if God has put you in a position to be John the Baptist to someone. Is there someone in your life who needs a wake-up call? I'm not talking about judging a person or throwing stones, I'm talking about speaking the truth in love to them: "Joan, if you keep drinking like you are now, you're going to lose your kids." "Larry, if you don't end that relationship cold-turkey right now, you're going to ruin your family." "Lee, the life you're living is a lie. Why not come clean before you're in so deep you can never get out?" Just like John the Baptist, you don't have to blame, just point out consequences, "if you don't turn around soon, you're going to be lost forever."

That kind of warning wasn't the *end* of John's message, and it can't be the end of ours. He also told people that there was hope: something they could do—and someone they could meet—who would help them take the next steps in turning their lives around. I think so many people came out to hear John's message because he not only called a sinner a sinner, he gave people hope by pointing the way to new life, by leading them to someone greater than himself. If we truly want to help people begin a new life, we can't only point out where they're going wrong, we have to point them in the right direction.

John pointed people to Jesus. He said, "this baptism is just the beginning, there's a guy coming after me, wait till he baptizes you with the Holy Spirit..." When we're trying to help people, we need to have the courage to go beyond meeting their *present* need and point them to the one who can meet their *every* need: Jesus the Messiah.

John knew that *he* wasn't the Messiah. *He* wasn't the solution to their sin problem. We don't have to be the messiah either. We won't be the ones who will save and heal people. This should relieve us of a lot of pressure. But we can lead people to the one who can save and heal: Jesus.

Don't be surprised if you find yourself called to be John the Baptist for someone this Christmas. If that happens, don't force the issue, but don't be afraid to speak out, either. There's a risk in speaking up, but there's a risk in saying nothing, too. The Bible tells us to speak the truth in love. With God's help we can do just that with our friends and family. We might begin that awkward conversation with a question:

May I speak plainly to you? I'm no an expert on these things, and I'm not perfect myself. I *am* worried for you. You're doing things that don't seem like your best self. I'm afraid you're really going to hurt yourself and your family....

Then just leave it at that and see what the response is. If the door is open to more discussion, you'll know. And if it's not, you'll know that soon enough, too. Either way you'll know that you did your best to help your friend and honor God.

Just like John the Baptist was "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ," to people thousands of years ago, *you* may be the beginning of that news for someone today. Pray for the courage to prepare the way for Jesus to enter into someone's life this Christmas. Amen

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Jeff Gibelius, Pastor

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