

A Most Unusual Prophet

December 4, 2011

Mark 1:1-8

Sometimes, when you hear the same thing all the time, it starts to become less and less meaningful. For example, right now, at this time in the year, advertisements in the newspaper, on TV and the radio are all saying the same thing.

Of course, this year, things may be a little different, but usually around this time all we hear is things like, "There is a special sale going on right now. JCPenny is having a special, one-day only sale. Sears is having a special, three hour sale, Saturday only, from 7AM until 10AM. Kohl's is having a yellow dot sale – some things are marked down 50 to 75 percent off!

You better get there fast, because there are incredible deals at these sales. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for you, and you don't want to miss it."

When you see these commercials or read these ads, you feel a sense of urgency. At first, you think, "Wow, I really don't need anything, but it sounds too good to miss."

But after awhile, this kind of advertising becomes less and less meaningful. You start to realize that JCPenny has one-day-only sales all the time. The Saturday only, three hour sale at Sears will happen again, there's no doubt about that. And when you go to the Kohl's yellow dot sale, you see that most of the items with yellow dots are things you really don't want.

The advertising, the sales, all becomes less and less meaningful. And the reason why is because we have become saturated with advertising language. It all sounds the same.

I wonder if this is how it is as people think about the spiritual aspect of Christmas. What is the real meaning of Christmas? I wonder if our society has become saturated with the same clichés, the same spiritual sappy-talk you hear every December. So much talk about love and sharing and caring and singing and hugging!

Christmas! A time for family. A time for charity. Every day you hear this, in between the advertising for sales at local stores. And then all the churches jump on the bandwagon and say the same sorts of things.

Come to our church, they all say. We are the friendliest. We have the best this, the best that. Come to us, and you will experience all the love and sharing and caring and hugging and singing that you're looking for this time of the year. Are we becoming saturated with spiritual sappy-talk during the month of December?

Or, if all that doesn't get us, maybe it's the going to the attic and bringing down all the decorations, putting up the tree and all the lights, purchasing the gifts, doing all the holiday cooking and baking and maybe a thousand other things that "need" to be done before Christmas.

And these days, there are loud voices that say we can't even call it the Christmas season!

As we know, we are in Advent, which marks the beginning of a new church year. This year, most of our Gospel texts will be drawn from Mark, which is believed to be the first Gospel written, and is certainly the shortest.

Now some may find today's Scripture an unusual choice for a Christmas/Advent sermon since in Mark we find the only gospel account in the Bible that has nothing at all to say about the birth of Jesus. In fact Mark mentions neither the miraculous conception nor the birth of Jesus.

Mark is rather straightforward, getting right to the point. Mark doesn't begin with angels whispering in Mary's ear. There are no shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, no wise men from the East following a star, no big-eyed animals standing around a straw-stuffed manger.

Nor does Mark attempt to give us a theological explanation of the incarnation, as does the Gospel of John, with his description of the Word becoming flesh.

Rather, Mark simply states the fact that he is writing about the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is as if Mark doesn't care about how the birth of Jesus took place, or how the incarnation occurred.

Let me set a backdrop that will help us to better understand our Gospel lesson. First, we need to understand that Mark is writing to people who were in distress. It is believed that Mark was writing to believers in Rome who were under persecution. This means that the message had to be short, sweet and to the point.

True to that, Mark begins his Gospel with the words, "This is the beginning of the Good News – the Gospel – about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." (v. 1) Mark doesn't mince words. He wants to get across that which is most important to people who are in distress. And that is – don't despair. I have Good News to share. Jesus Christ, the Son of God has come.

So even though Mark doesn't give us a classic Christmas story, when he opens his book, he essentially wraps up the Christmas message in just a few words.

He just states that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and then, after loosely quoting an Old Testament prophesy, he jumps to the wilderness of Judea, and we meet John the Baptist.

We realize right away that John is different from all the others. I don't think you'd see him at any of those one-day sales at JC Penny. Most of us likely have some people in our family who could be classified as a little different. There are just some folks who if they were invited to a social function you would feel a little uncomfortable to have them around. John was like that.

We're told that he wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt, probably homemade, around his waist. Instead of Thanksgiving turkey, we're told that he ate locusts and wild honey.

He probably would have done well on the television series Survivor. But he probably would have been the first one voted off the island, because of the things he said – his message. He doesn't use that spiritual sappy-talk you hear every December. He doesn't use all those clichés about caring and sharing and family and giving and hugging and singing that you hear this time of the year.

You can tell right away that he's not a salesman – John the Baptist will not try to sweet talk you into anything.

And he's certainly not a politician, trying to match his words to whatever the popular opinion of the day is. He's a breath of fresh air. This guy doesn't care what people say or think about him. And his message is one that hits you in the heart.

Now, given the terse, get right to the point style of Mark's writing, don't you find it a little bit strange that he would take the time to describe how John was clothed and what he ate? Yet Mark takes the time to tell us that John was clothed in a cheap, scratchy robe woven from camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist.

And what a diet he was on, certainly not one that would interest me. I think I would rather starve to death than eat locusts, even if they were dipped in honey. That sounds like a page out of the script for a "Survivor" challenge. Given this description, we can imagine that John's hair and beard look as if they had never been cut or combed, and his body was as skinny as a cactus. Talk about making a statement with your appearance!

In fact, I doubt that there is a person gathered here this morning, who, if you were to meet a person dressed like John, living off the wilderness by eating locusts, wouldn't look at him as some kind of freak. But that is not what I believe Mark is trying to tell us by his description of John. Quite the opposite, actually.

For a camel's hair robe with a leather belt, is the exact same outfit that the prophet Elijah wore 800 years before John. Mark's description of John the baptizer identified him as the messenger of God, predicted by Isaiah, dressed like Elijah – a prophet in the classic sense. It is Mark's way of telling us, right from the beginning of his Gospel, that the fulfillment of God's promise to send the Messiah, the Christ, was at hand.

I believe that the people living back at the time John the baptizer began his ministry would have understood this strange dress and demeanor of this man in the wilderness to be a sign that he was called by God. Why else would the people from the whole region, including the holy city of Jerusalem, go out to hear him preach.

Think about it. John planted himself in the middle of nowhere. He set up shop in the wilderness, and anyone who wanted to hear what he had to say, had to go to a lot of trouble just to get to within shouting distance.

They may have had to borrow their neighbor's donkey, or set off on foot with enough water and food for the journey, which led them down lonely trails that were thick with bandits. The wilderness certainly wouldn't be the site one would choose for a mission site today.

Yet, people by the thousands went out to see this man, who seemed to step out of the pages of Israel's past. And I don't think that all of these people made this journey into the wilderness just to see a freak. It wasn't just John's attire that identified him as a messenger of God, it was also his message.

John proclaimed that someone was coming, someone so spectacular that it was not enough simply to hang around waiting for him to arrive. He called upon the people to be honest with themselves, to step back from their daily routines and prepare their hearts to receive the one whom God was sending, the one who would redeem them from their sin, and offer them new life.

He challenged them to get ready - to repent, and embrace the Son of God.

In our love of the celebration of the birth of Jesus I think we sometimes get lost. We love to prepare for Christ because it's like preparing for a baby to be born. We get so wrapped up in the manger scene that we forget that He is not a baby anymore! This one who was born into a crude manger is now a KING.

But it began with the gospel, which literally means "good news." That is the good news that Mark tells us so tersely, so succinctly and to the point. The news that began with John the baptizer. He was the messenger, and his message lit him up like a bonfire in the wilderness.

People were drawn to him, not just because of how he dressed and what he ate, but because what he had to say offered the people hope – a chance to come clean and start over again, through the waters of baptism.

Isn't it interesting that the good news of God's intervention into our lives to redeem us from sin and death, always starts with a messenger.

Whether it is an angel whispering in Mary's ear, or shepherds beholding the heavens open to proclaim the birth of God's Son, or a skinny prophet standing knee deep in the Jordan river calling us to repent, God always seems to begin with a promise, mouthed by a messenger.

And Mark tells us that John knew his role in proclaiming the advent of God's Messiah. John was just God's messenger. He did not seek recognition for himself. His mission was to prepare people to receive the one who was greater than himself, to whom John himself awaited and praised – the one who would redeem even God's earthly messenger.

For John knew that to his baptism of repentance our Lord would add the gift of God's Spirit, which would empower those who entered the waters of baptism to be become redeemed children of God in Christ.

You know, if our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator;
If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist;
If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist;
If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer;

But our greatest need was forgiveness and reconciliation to God, so God sent us a Savior.

The beginning of Mark's Gospel may be terse and to the point, but it is a message that we all need to hear. It is a message that calls upon us to prepare our hearts and minds to receive Jesus the Christ, the Son of God into our lives anew. It is a message that begs us to leave our daily routines, to put into perspective the many activities that we engage in as we celebrate our Lord's advent to earth, and truly remember who it is that has come into our lives.

It is a message that calls us to remember our baptism into the saving grace of God, through which we have been united to our Lord's death and resurrection, which adopts us as children of God, and empowers us for new life.

Maybe, just maybe Mark hits the nail on the head. Maybe he understands that the people who will be reading his words – us – live in a wilderness. Maybe John the Baptist isn't so strange after all. Maybe his dress allows him to relate to those of us who also live in the wilderness.

Maybe his wilderness life allows us to focus our whole attention on the One to Whom John was pointing – Jesus – and not on John. Maybe, just maybe, through John's humble dress and surroundings God was trying to create a contrast.

Maybe God wanted us to see the beauty of Christ and the hollowness of this world's temporary pleasures. Maybe, just maybe - those of us who are wandering and struggling - can hear this message better from someone who looks like us and lives like us - John the Baptist.

Maybe, just maybe – the voice of one calling in the wilderness - is not such a strange place to start talking about Christmas after all.