

Sermon – January 5, 2020

“A Voice Cries Out!”

Mark1: 1-8

Mark opens his book not with a birth narrative of Jesus, but with this line: “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”. This means that everything Mark has to say about Jesus – all the healing, preaching, teaching, even his death and resurrection – is only the beginning of the good news. One has to wait patiently how it unfolds. Like a new year unfolding in our midst. This good news about Jesus begins with a prophetic voice. It’s the voice of someone crying out – someone who is like Isaiah comforting desperate Israel at its low points of history. For Mark, Isaiah’s promise of comfort, deliverance, and renewal was re-echoed by John the Baptizer in the wilderness. John is a prophet - the “voice crying out” to the Jewish people under the Roman occupation waiting for a Messiah to save them. John has a role to play and he played it so well. He arrives on the scene as the one who prepares, the prophet who points to Jesus as the One whom the prophets of old prophesied. John simultaneously points us back to the past, calls for action from his hearers in the present, and points us all into the future.

And so people came. They traveled ten, twenty, thirty, miles - out of their homes and comfort zones and into the wilderness to take a holy plunge in the Jordan River. What did they come to see? A grand circus? A spectacular show? No. They came out to see a prophet. They came out to see a man who had found the powerful presence of God in the wilderness. The man who offers a bath in the Jordan River as a symbol of repentance - a way of preparing oneself – refreshed and renewed, ready to meet God in their deepest needs! Mark calls him the Baptizer! His title pertains to his role in a water ritual - baptizing people in the Jordan River.

You too have met him before. He comes year after year at every Advent time but it makes more sense for him to show up on this first Sunday in the New Year after we have celebrated the birth of Jesus. And you can easily detect him. If he strolls into our worship service today, all eyes would be on him! First, he is dressed in counterculture clothes - that smelly outfit of camel's hair and leather belt - not exactly a Sunday best attire. His demeanor is intimidating,

rude and glaring. You give him your passport and he stamps it with “welcome, you brood of vipers!” Then there's that weird diet he eats—locusts and wild honey. Not exactly our choice to serve during coffee time. John the Baptizer is not your fun kind of guy. He comes from the line of prophets – the hoppers, the demanders and the bidders who call for change, repentance, reorganization, renewal. He is fearless, denouncing sinfulness and acts of injustices wherever he found it. He offends the religious authorities and harshly criticizes the corrupt political leaders of his time. Relentless and persistent, John the Baptizer is important. With John's emergence from the wilderness, the sound of the prophetic voice was again heard in the land after 400 years with no active prophets. No wonder people came to him: "They went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea, and all the region around Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river, confessing their sins."

John is just not cut out to fit in with our cultural life. He'd stand up and shout, *"This year better be different! Going through the motions of a New Year will not guarantee you joy, peace, or the perfect resolution you ever wished for."* John saw the misery of his own people and he called each one to repent, to prepare, to get ready for the coming of the One who will change the world. Why did all those people come to the water? Were they ready to be baptized and did they realize what that might mean for them? Were they ready to begin again? The people were ready to be offended, ready to be shaken up; they were desperately waiting for a Messiah to save them, earnestly longing to be turned around, or if not around, turned toward something or someone who could show them the way. People came to the river because they were tired of how things had become.

John's world and our present world are similar in many ways. John's wakeup call is helpful in these days as we have had so many harsh wakeup calls. We've had so many unsettling moments in which our cozy, comfortable lives have been disrupted by painful realities. It could be the reality of an illness, or death of a loved one, an ugly separation or moments of depression. We've been asked to reckon with all the ways we've lived in the community as if other lives don't matter. We've been asked to acknowledge our own biases and privileges. We've heard voices of climate change advocates. We've also heard voices spewing racism, gender biases,

war, violence and political unrest grow louder and more forceful in many parts of the world. John's voice cries out and wakes us up to the increasing fear and hatred of others. John nudges us to speak out against words and actions that exclude, blame, demean or put down any group of people or individual. As a Christian witness to God's love and concern for all people, John's invitation to plunge into the river of grace is to stand against fear and hatred and live out God's welcome for everyone, especially those who are isolated, lonely or marginalized. We need to do this at home, at work, at church, in our communities, yes, even online. John's voice is crying out to us and we must respond with Christian integrity.

2019 has come and gone and with it some joyous and sad moments. And here we are welcoming the start of a new decade. Most of us are not ready for the perpetual emergency of human life. We boldly think we have control over our destinies and we enjoy making rock solid plans on which to build our lives. Some of us love to think in terms of long-range planning but life is what happens when we are busy with other plans! Think for a moment of the plans you made for your life— 5 or 10 years ago? What about last year...has your life turned out the way you planned? The turn of a new year is nudging us to wait and listen to God's voice. How can we get ready for this life? How can we learn to bear our failures, live with our successes, suffer our losses, embrace happiness, prepare the way for grace, give ourselves to wonder, or sustain hope in this world in which we live? How can we sustain our dreams and visions for what is ahead? Are we ever ready?

As you came in today, you were given a star with a word written on it. What is your word? My word is persistence! I invite you to look at the word and ponder on it. Reflect how this word will move you forward to 2020. How will this word shape and continue to form who you are and the ways in which you see and relate to God, the world, each other and yourself? How can this word engage you in making choices? What is the meaning of this word for you? Share that word with the one sitting beside you. How will you share the meaning of this word with others? In our reflecting, John calls us forward. We are compelled to move forward just as those ancient folks who came down to the water to be baptized and begin again. We are called out of our deep places of suffering, despair, loss and a sense of hopelessness. We are called to begin again, to be

shaken, to be transformed, to be moved toward something—whatever hope we could claim in whatever life story we are called to experience. Jesus came to the water too. He was compelled to move into a ministry and a life he was not really prepared for, as he moved into a world which was not ready to receive him. A world not ready to hear the good news. Why would the ministry of Jesus be so difficult? Because that world, as this one we have, was seeking direction, looking for acts of redemption through the people who were touched and challenged by God’s love. Let this be a resolution – that we become angels of change and bearers of God’s love so that the world may know the good news.

John the Baptizer baptized the best way he knew—with cleansing, healing water that involved confession and repentance. It is a baptism that requires time and intentionality, of gospel living, of sharing, of growing in compassion, of truth-telling, of healing and forgiveness. This is indeed the beginning of Good News! It is good news for all of us as we begin again – as we journey in 2020.

Let me close with a prayer written by Joyce Rupp in her book *Out of the Ordinary*:

Faithful Companion, in this New year, we pray:

To live deeply, with purpose,

To live freely with detachment,

To live wisely with humility,

To live justly with compassion,

To live lovingly with fidelity,

To live mindfully with awareness,

To live gratefully with generosity,

To live fully with enthusiasm.

Help us to hold this vision and to daily renew it in my heart,

Becoming ever more one with you, our truest Hope. Amen.