

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
 Mark 1:1-8, Second Sunday of Advent

December 4, 2005
 The Rev. Robin Long Sanderson

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

1The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2It is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
 who will prepare your way"

3"a voice of one calling in the desert,

'Prepare the way for the Lord,
 make straight paths for him.' "

4And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 6John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to touch down and untie. 8I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Would you date him? The answer to this question is what separated the men from the boys at Miami University of Ohio. It didn't matter if the guy in question was a mathematical genius, a sensitive and insightful poet, or a leading athlete—what mattered among my friends and me was whether or not he was dateable. And what made a guy dateable? It depended on who you asked. If you asked my roommate Joni, she would tell you that it's all about his shoes. In her estimation, if a guy didn't take good care of his shoes, he was not dateable. If you've ever noticed Corey's footwear, you know that the nature of a man's footwear is not high on my list of qualifications of dateability. If you asked my friend Liz, she'd tell you that it was all about height. Liz is tall and she only dated men who were taller than she was—this meant they needed to be at least six feet one inch tall. And if you would have asked me, I'd have told you that personal hygiene was the number one qualification for dateability. If a guy wasn't clean or even if he appeared to be clean but didn't smell that way, he was not dateable. And I was a real stickler about it—I can sniff out the difference between a guy who is clean and a guy who is using cologne and deodorant to try and smell clean even when he's not. Indeed, for me, cleanliness is next to godliness.

And that is why I have a hard time accepting John the Baptist. He was next to godliness, the prophet sent just before Jesus to pave the way for Christ, but he was anything but clean. From what we learn of him in scripture, he was a wild kind of guy, living a nomadic life out in the desert. He wore clothes made of camel hair. Now I've smelled a camel, even gave one a little kiss on the cheek when we were on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, and though cute, that beast stunk and I imagine that John the Baptist did too. And though there were likely few folks in that time who were as obsessed with personal hygiene as am I, history reveals that John was not being judged dateable by the single, young women of the Jerusalem suburbs, and indeed was considered downright distasteful and a person to be avoided by most folks. Not because he smelled, but because he made people uncomfortable. He wasn't particularly likeable and his preaching was all doom and gloom, telling folks they had better repent and get ready because the Messiah was a comin'.

But, what's interesting about John the Baptist is that, though a wild and woolly fellow whom, if we saw him coming down St. Joseph's Street toward us we would pop into Enerdyne and watch until he'd passed, what made him interesting is that he was an effective prophet. He was good at what he did. He called the status quo into question and got folks to really think about how they were living. He was

so good at what he did, he was such a threat to “business as usual” that Herod, the Roman ruler of the region, eventually had him killed—his head served up on a platter.

But if he was so good at what he did, why didn’t folks like him more? What was so distasteful about his very being that Herod would order him executed. John probably wasn’t particularly likeable because he confronted the status quo. He chose his simple life in the wilderness—it’s not that it was forced upon him by poverty or lack of status—it was a conscious choice. When someone chooses to be different, it is often perceived as a challenge, though certainly not intended to be. Corey and I have friends—Kay and Randy—who choose to live a simple lifestyle, they have no electricity and minimal amenities in their home. Whenever I’m talking with Kay, I feel slightly defensive of my choice to live in a house with electricity and plumbing. Kay has never suggested that I live any differently, but in my weaker moments, I think she is somehow better or more enlightened than I am because she chooses, and is able to maintain, such a different lifestyle. I imagine that folks felt the same way about John. He put them on the edge and made them feel uncomfortable because he was so different. He was threatening to the common folk. He wasn’t a people pleaser—saying and doing the things he knew the people wanted him to say and do in order for them to like him.

John wasn’t concerned about being liked. He knew what he was called to do. He knew what God had in mind for him. And because he knew God was with him, he had little concern for those who were against him, which was essential to his mission and ministry. He was effective because he lived for God and people recognized that. They lined up to be baptized by him. Folks believed his warnings that they better repent and be baptized because the Lord was on the way. They didn’t believe him because they liked him, they believed him because he was a man of integrity and purpose. And because John knew his purpose and followed God’s call on his life, John had peace—that inner peace that passes all understanding. That peace that is unique to believers who know that no matter how bad this life gets, no matter how huge their mistakes, no matter who likes them and who doesn’t—that peace that comes from knowing the Good News of Jesus Christ. And the good news is that this life is not as good as it gets, that there is a God who loves you and cares deeply for you, the good news that God is always with you, even when it feels like the world is against you. That’s the peace of Christ that John had deep in his soul. And because of it, he was able to do a very difficult task.

And though it’s called Gospel in the beginning of this morning’s reading from Mark—gospel meaning Good News—the Good News is not always welcome news—not just in John’s time but also, and I think especially, in our time. The book for this past month’s Read ‘Em and Eat series was Approval Addiction by Joyce Meyer. The author is clear that sharing the Good News is not always something that makes one likeable. She also points out that a person who is overly concerned with being liked probably won’t be especially effective in sharing the Good News. This isn’t to say that there’s anything wrong with wanting to be liked, we all want to be liked. But her point is, that when we put other people’s acceptance of us ahead of God’s purpose for our lives, we’re setting ourselves up for stress, disappointment, discontent, and disharmony in our relationships. The people pleaser, the one who has an addiction to approval, is a person who lives a life of constant ups and downs based on the praise and criticism, or even perceived criticism, of other people. This is a hard life with the addiction to other people’s approval often distracting the person from the Good News of Jesus Christ. And no Gospel leads to no peace.

And so if we, on this second Sunday of Advent, this Sunday on which we light the candle of peace, if we’re to know the peace we pray for, we need to know the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. And knowing that Gospel, that we are loved by God no matter what, is a message of freedom. The

Gospel truth has the power to slice through the chains that bind us to the need for approval and set us free to follow God's call on our lives. That's the power of knowing the Gospel, the good news.

And not only that, but knowing the Good News also prepares us to be the Good News. A Biblical scholar describes the book of Mark as having the following agenda. [To describe] *how Jesus was good news and brought good news and how we can be good news*. John was Good News. And if we strive to be like him—not smelly and living out in the forests of Northern Michigan—but willing to put our lives on the line for what we know is true about God—then we too will be Good News. We are Good News when speak out against an unjust political policy. We are Good News when we confront someone who is behaving poorly, even if it's in church, and speak the truth in love that every person is accepted but every behavior is not. We are Good News when realize that we have enough to get by, when we stop hoarding our money and stuff “just in case”, and share abundantly even if it means we'll be driving a car that's not as nice as the one next to it in the parking lot and our clothes might be a bit dated or we won't be able to take as long of a vacation this year. We are Good News when we talk about our faith and the way God loves us, even if it makes us seem a little silly at a dinner party—because you never know when there's someone there who is desperate to hear that message. We are Good News when we stop the gossip—even though it may be a lot of fun, when we put an end to the racial joking, when we call someone on their judgmental comments. We are Good News when we do these things. But it takes courage to be the Good News and it takes an inner peace to have courage and it takes the recovery from Addiction Approval to have that courage. We will have peace, though not necessarily popularity and fame, when we live for God, not when we live for approval.

And so, if he's walked into a bar in Oxford, Ohio back in 1996, I wouldn't have deemed him dateable. But this morning, John the Baptist has walked into our church through the pages of Scripture. His words speak to us of repentance; his life speaks to us of authenticity, honesty, and a commitment to live of God. Let us follow him as we, during this Advent season, make our way to the Stable where the Peace of Christ will be one of the gifts we receive from our Infant King.