

“Prepare the Way”
or Why Interims Like John the Baptist
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Mark 1:1-8

For Mark, the story of Jesus’ ministry begins with the coming of John the Baptist to the wilderness of Judea. In today’s reading John arrives, preaching and calling the people to repentance and to baptism. In Mark’s version, John uses less strong language about baptism than does Matthew who speaks of baptism with fire, cleaning the threshing room floor and burning the chaff-- actions attributed to the coming of God. Listen for and hear God’s message to us this morning.

Mark 1: 1-8

There are many ways to approach this particular text from Mark. We could all stand and clap and sing the song from Godspell (sing, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord...”). We could ponder why there is no Christmas story in Mark and complain that we’ve been cheated out of the holiday. Or, we could look at the role that John the Baptist played in announcing and ushering in the ministry of Jesus. John was the last of the great biblical prophets. In fact, Jesus called him the greatest of prophets. John’s job was to get the people ready to recognize and receive Jesus.

I think being a prophet may be the riskiest job God ever gave a human being-- that is-- next to being the Messiah, of course. Neither job comes with much security, but the retirement plan is heavenly, or so the old joke tells us.

John the Baptist stormed out of the wilderness and demanded that the people change their ways. He didn’t think they were following God’s ways; he didn’t think they were treating each other well; and he definitely felt that the people were not taking their responsibilities for one another seriously. He told them to change their ways, to open their eyes, and to get ready for the One who was to come.

I love John the Baptist. Even with all his crudeness, he was an admirable guy. He had a job to do. His “mission from God” to use that Blues Brothers phrase, was to get things ready for the Messiah. He didn’t pretend to be the Messiah. He never said he could take the Messiah’s place. He simply told the truth--he called a spade a spade; he called the king a sinner; he called the queen a sinner; and he told them all that God knew what was going on.

John’s mission was not a pleasant one. He was the one who was called to clean up the problems of the day, and show the people that they could be saved--as individuals and as part of society.

John the Baptist is a major role model for Interim Ministry. Interim ministers are called to go into a church, to speak the truth in love; to help clean up the problems of the past; to hold up a mirror for the church to see itself as it is; and to prepare for the coming of a new pastoral leader. It is at the end of that analogy that it begins to break down-- because I do not want anyone to place the burden of Messiahship on the new minister when he or she comes.

The problems that John the Baptist ran into are the same ones that Interims find. People don't want to hear the truth when it's unpleasant or challenging. No one wants to hear that their actions and attitudes may be causing harm to others and to the congregation as a whole. No one wants to think of themselves or their friends as sinners who fall short of the glory God intends for us. And, just who is that outsider who's trying to tell us these things we don't want to hear? Let's just hurry up and call a new pastor and everything can go back to the comfortable way it was... but it doesn't work that way.

John the Baptist comes up on the lectionary cycle every year at this time-- for a reason. It happens every second Sunday of Advent. John storms out of the wilderness challenging the people to get ready-- to be prepared. That's a major Advent task and it's one of the tasks of Interim Ministry--coming to terms with history and getting ready for new leadership-- new lay leadership and new pastoral leadership. But this getting ready takes a lot of work.

During Advent, we're asked to wait and to prepare for the coming of the Christ Child again into the world and into our lives. Advent comes during the time of long, dark nights when spring seems far off. That's a good analogy for where we are as a congregation. We, too, are in a time of waiting and preparation. Not just passive waiting, doing nothing, going nowhere. We are in a time of active waiting-- a time for making a plan for the future of this church.

This is our first holiday season together. We're still getting to know each other— finding out our strengths and weaknesses—learning our hopes and dreams. We're figuring out how and why we will be interacting to do the work—the mission and ministry of this church. But we'll do just fine, you wait and see.

With the coming of Advent, we can acknowledge that we, too, are in a period of darkness. To deny the darkness of Advent is to deny the need for God to send the Light of Christ into the world. To deny the darkness of Advent is to deny the geographical reality of where we live and the seasonal depression that many face. To deny the darkness of Advent is to ignore the level of pain many feel as they approach the holidays without a loved one who has died, or without the Norman Rockwell family to share it with. When Christmas finally comes, the light shines longer every day. We know that spring will eventually come, and the earth will break forth into new life. The light of Christmas is all the brighter because of the contrast of Advent. We also keep moving toward the light of a new day, toward a new year, a new vision, and a new pastoral leadership team.

But all this, like the passing of the seasons, takes time. Soon a Search Committee will be formed, we will keep you updated on our progress. You will all be part of the process, we don't want anyone to feel left out. Much work has been done; and more work will be done, like updated job descriptions and personnel policies.

The Whole People of God curriculum says: "For John and the people who went out to meet him, baptism had a revolutionary character. The baptized people turned away from their former lives and ways. By crossing the Jordan River they were not only cleansed of sin, but they symbolically crossed into the promised land to become citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Baptism is about citizenship; it is about where a person's loyalty lies. Those baptized by John dreamed of a new life and a new way and made a commitment to prepare for new things God was doing. Today we are called to repent;" to begin to live our lives in a new way. We are called as God's people to prepare the way-- prepare the way for justice, for wholeness, for trust, for truth and ultimately, we are called to prepare the way for the birth of Christ's Spirit anew within us, and within our faith community.

Thanks be to God. Amen.