

YOU'RE GONNA LOVE THIS GUY
Mark 1:1-8
December 4, 2011

It's the 2nd Sunday of Advent . . . one would probably expect a sermon/message that begins to highlight Christmas. "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas."

But in Mark's Gospel we find no birth story as in Luke or Matthew . . . or John's account. No, Mark hearkens back to the words of Old Testament prophets . . . at least for the first three verses and having backed up, as if to get a running start, he charges breathlessly into his story. He doesn't pause to let us linger at the manger of the baby Jesus nor does he introduce us to Magi from the east or some lowly shepherds in the fields accosted by angelic messengers. He starts with another messenger, one whose appearance was anticipated by Isaiah. That messenger is the one we know as John the Bizarre . . . excuse me the Baptizer. But he was bizarre wasn't he? A diet of locust dipped in honey, an outsider sporting a camel hair garment and a leather belt, not a stylish statement, but . . . well . . .

kinda freaky. But he captured an audience, a big one, ranging from Jerusalem white collar professionals to a large collection of nobodies, ne'er-to-wells peasants from the Judean countryside. He was charismatic with little to recommend him as a popular figure except a fierce commitment to the truth. And that was the draw!

Mark begins with this larger than life character. Unlike most contemporary larger-than-life who appear on the scene and search out the spotlight and briefly capture the public's fascination, holding on as long as they can, John makes it clear that he is only a transitional figure who will pass soon. He is the Elijah figure who Isaiah said would prepare the way and make the coming one's path straight. You don't make a path straight unless it has become crooked, a word that speaks of corruption, distortion. Thus John's message of preparation is one of confession and repentance. There's that word that you only hear in churches and not terribly often at that. It doesn't sound like a Christmas word or the promised good news. That's because it urges us to face the truth about ourselves and to change directions. Who wants

to do either of those things? Wouldn't we rather go to a "feel good" church where we're told we're on the right track; that, at worst, a little tinkering is all that's needed; a touch of make-up here, a slight adjustment there. But it wouldn't be John's message at Advent.

Why did John collect such a crowd? Was it just some ancient middle eastern quirk long since passed? Maybe. Maybe not. Here we are on this 2nd Sunday in Advent 2011 and is there an audience for such rhetoric? Most would declare they have come for uplifting, seasonal good news. But is it good news that simply confirms us and all we do? Is it the worldly "good news?" Or, is it possible that some come burdened with guilt, disillusionment; tired of the rat race where only the rats win . . . willing to acknowledge that we have invested far too much of ourselves in the property on the crooked road. We have not lived as God intended, made mistakes, violated simple human decency; in short, sins of commission and omission. No excuses, minimizing, justification or rationalizing. None of this, "I

may not be the best person in the world, but I'm not the worst either." "Here's the truth: We'll never have different lives without first telling the truth about our present selves." The amazing thing is what appears to be bad news, finger pointing, accusatory, condemnatory, negative . . . is in fact nothing less than a gift from God – grace. God loves us enough to hold up the mirror . . . of truth to us and then offer the grace that you can change. There is good news!

We all know this as much as we avoid it: Sometimes the truth hurts before it heals; confronts before it comforts.

The church session was contentious. Complaints were being lodged about the preacher. "Abrasive," some said. "Judgmental; full of scolding." It didn't sit well and the prospects for the pastor's continued tenure looked dim.

Then one woman rose and spoke, "I won't deny that I've found many of our pastor's sermons difficult to hear. And yet, I

¹ Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Vol 39, No 4, p 43

am reminded that Jesus is not only my savior, but also my source of truth. Jesus cares enough to tell us the truth. That's why I'm grateful for pastor's sermons, even when they hurt."

I don't know whether that convinced the session to let the pastor stay or not. A steady diet of judgment would be difficult to digest. On the other hand, a diet of smiling feel good gospel would provide little spiritual nutrition.

There are times we must face the bad news for the good news of God's grace to be embraced. Sometimes it gets worse before it can get better.

A young woman in her late 20's was terminated from her high paying executive position. She was surprised, devastated, wondering which way to turn next. But she found courage and told an old friend, "I think my generation took a lot of things for granted. I was on this treadmill called the American dream . . . it had its price. I worked all the time, accumulated more and more stuff and thought that was life. I'm learning that is not life at all. I think I've been given a chance to

refocus, to put things in perspective, and I'm going to do just that."

Now I know some are thinking – it's whistling in the dark, a thinly disguised effort to put lipstick on a pig. For some . . . perhaps. But, it is a truth that many have discovered. Sometimes grace is accessed by having our lives shaken.

In sum, we'll never have different lives without first telling the truth about our present selves. And God loves us enough to get us through. So preach on John. Get us ready for the coming of the Christ. Amen.



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