

“Advent Surprise” GPPC 12-10-17  
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13, Mark 1:1-8

When you’re reading the Bible, are you ever surprised to notice something you’d never noticed before? You’re reading a familiar passage, a passage you’ve read many times before, and then all of a sudden you say, “Wait. What? I never noticed that.” Does that ever happen to you?

Well, I’ve been preaching about John the Baptist literally for decades. The lectionary’s three-year cycle of suggested Bible readings has John the Baptist come up every year on the second Sunday of Advent and the second Sunday of Lent. So typically you can’t get to Christmas or Easter without going through John the Baptist.

As you know, John wears clothing made of camel’s hair, has a leather belt around his waist, eats locusts and wild honey. In other words, John looks like a prophet from the Old Testament who has snuck his way into the New Testament. And in sermons I’ll sometimes compare John to somebody from my past. An enraged drill sergeant from U.S. Army basic training shouting expletives and spittle in my

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face. Or an ornery professor who seems impossible to satisfy. Or a cursing, music-stand-throwing conductor. All of these people, through sheer persistent intimidation, got more out of others and me than we thought possible. Tough love, baby.

So I was looking at the gospel reading for today, feeling happy about coming up with a similar illustration for the sermon this morning. Surely God would at least grant me a delicious memory of a grouchy, hard-to-satisfy seminary professor.

Alas, it hit me suddenly that there was only one problem with my homiletical strategy. It's just not there in this text. In this section of Mark's gospel John the Baptist does *not* get mad. He does not call anybody names. And he certainly does not threaten.

Yeah, we can look at Matthew's and Luke's version of the story. And there's John the Baptist hollering at people calling them "a brood of vipers." Calling people a bunch of baby snakes—that, my friends, is some creative cussing. And then he threatens them again and says they shouldn't imagine they can depend on their lineage, their heritage, instead of actually being faithful to God. And even now, says John,

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unfruitful trees are being tossed into the fire. Love the subtle metaphor, John.

Matthew and Luke blister us with a furious John the Baptist. But not Mark. He does not say a single word here about John being angry. Look in the Bible for yourself. Zero. Zilch. Nada.

Why? Why doesn't Mark present us with an infuriated John the Baptist? Maybe because Mark is especially trying to make a point and trying to make that point over and over without any interference or distraction.

Mark begins his gospel in an odd way, not with a genealogy, not with a birth story, or poetic language about a preexistent Word. No. He begins his gospel with a strange redundancy--by telling us he is beginning his gospel. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

These are the first words he writes. So why does he bother to tell us it's the beginning. As one scholar says, "By referring to his account as 'the beginning,' [Mark probably]...meant to say that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were, for all their central importance, but the

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beginning of the mission to bear the Good News to every nation under heaven.” (Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year B, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, 27.*)

Yes, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are the center of our faith—the beginning of the good news. But God is not finished. God is still working to bring good news to all the world. And guess who’s going to help?

Mark is going to tell us. He quotes from several Old Testament books, in particular, the prophet Isaiah. And maybe you students of the Bible are now thinking, “I know Isaiah got angry at Israel’s disobedience. I’ve read it.” But not here. Mark quotes from Isaiah chapter 40, a passage about Israel’s return from the Babylonian exile. “See, I’m sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Can we imagine the people of Israel, streaming across the desert, finally freed from captivity and going home?

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And one writer says the quote in Mark's gospel is a "new Exodus" for the church. (Richard A. Horsley, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV*, 1792.)

But a new Exodus from what?

Sin. Our estrangement from God, our separation from each other, our destruction of the creation itself. Mark is using this quote from the Old Testament to describe a new exodus, a new freedom from bondage to sin. And this new exodus, this good news comes in three ways.

First, it comes from God's new vision sent to us. Through John the Baptist God calls us to repent, to turn away from the attitudes, speech, and action that are sinful, that hurt our relationship with God, each other, and creation. First comes God's vision of repentance for us as individuals and a community. A call to mold ourselves more closely to the contours of a moral life.

In the news we continue to hear about powerful people using their power in the workplace to oppress others. And, in the name of control, this oppression has done terrible damage to its victims, denying their personhood, casting aside their preciousness as children of God, taking

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away their ability to live in safety and to pursue their dreams. It is evil.

And sometimes it is criminal.

Though they may not know it yet, this oppression has also damaged the oppressors who have denied their own humanity and divorced themselves from potential relationships of mutuality and equality. They've settled for meanness and control, when instead they could have experienced the wonder and delight of working as true colleagues and friends. So the oppressors are slowly learning that they have not only harmed others, but they have harmed themselves. And what is needed is repentance, a changing of attitudes, words, and behaviors. And isn't this a step in the new exodus from bondage to sin?

John the Baptist does not yell at us, but he does invite each one of us to reflect upon our own lives. What are our attitudes, words, and behaviors that are not only hurting others but are hurting ourselves? Are we greedy, impatient, lustful, arrogant, bigoted, lazy, untruthful, self-centered? Which personal attitudes, words, or behaviors harm others and ourselves? This is where personal introspection in Advent is so important. During this holy time each of us is given the opportunity for

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self-reflection. What am I doing right? What am I doing wrong? What is God's true vision for my life?

Second, it's one thing to see the vision, it's another to begin to live it. So John says of Jesus, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I've baptized you with water; but he'll baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

So John not only claims Jesus grants us vision for our lives but through Jesus God empowers us to live that vision. As we worship, study, pray, read scripture together, serve the world, encourage and challenge each other as a church, we begin to see God's vision for our lives. And Jesus, whose sandals John is not worthy to untie, Jesus who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, empowers us to live the vision.

In the 2002 comedy movie *Two Weeks Notice*, Hugh Grant plays George Wade, a playboy billionaire who hires a brilliant, Harvard-educated environmental lawyer, Lucy Kelson, played by Sandra Bullock, to be his chief legal counsel and assistant. Over time George and Lucy come to respect each other, change each other, and enjoy each

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other's company. They fall into an unacknowledged love. But their relationship is sabotaged by George's failure to keep his word to Lucy not to tear down an old building that's important to so many citizens of a neighborhood.

Near the end of the movie, Lucy seems to have given up not merely upon George but also upon her work for justice. Sitting in her parents' kitchen, she tells her father that she is through. But he won't accept her despair and resignation. He says, "Then you change your tactics. You change your arguments. You don't give up. We didn't give up on civil rights or equality for women or fair housing. Honey."

"Hmm" she says. "As long as people can change, the world can change," he says. Bullock answers, "Yeah. But what if people can't change?"

"Hmm" he answers. Her dad takes a bite of cake and finally says, "Well, let me put it this way. I'm sitting here eating a piece of cheesecake made entirely of soy. And I hate it, but I'm eating it."

John the Baptist tells us that people can change and the world can change, because Jesus the Christ baptizes with the Holy Spirit. As we come together as the church, we come as people who not only become

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aware of God's vision, but who are also shaped by that vision, as we help to change the world. And when obstacles to God's justice, mercy, and love come our way, we do not give up. We just change tactics and arguments.

But maybe you say, "That sounds well and good, but every time we think we're making progress in the spiritual life, we eventually mess up. And so often our leaders, who seemed so promising, finally let us down. Why bother, if we, and those whom we admire, are doomed to failure?"

Why? Because the good news is that we are not Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We, and all the leaders we admire or merely tolerate, are imperfect. So we, and they, rely upon God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Yes, we are shaped by God's vision in Christ, empowered by God in Christ, but finally we are also forgiven by God in Christ. With every step, and at every moment, Christ is Lord, and we have the great privilege of simply being instruments of what God has and will accomplish in Christ. Isn't that what Mark is saying over and over here

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in this passage? This is not a bad news/good news passage. From start to finish, this is a good news, good news, and more good news passage.

This week, let's feel the peace that comes from knowing that good news. Let's spend some time reflecting on the vision that God gives us in Christ. Let's pay attention to how God in Christ might be empowering us to repent and live out God's vision for our lives. And let's know that when we fail, and when those we admire fail, God in Christ lifts us up, dusts us off, and says, "Change your tactics and arguments. It's okay. Get back out there and be who you are, my instruments, my messengers, my children, my beloved, my beloved. Amen. © Jeff Paschal