

“The Lord...is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”

**A Homily for Waterloo North Mennonite Church
10 December 2017**

Texts: Isaiah 40: 1-11; Mark 1: 1-8; and 2nd Peter 3: 8-15a

(Len Friesen)

I've long thought that the person who's asked to preach on John the Baptist really gets the short straw in the Advent cycle. After all, the other speakers get the happier, more seasonally appropriate Advent themes like Joy, Peace, Love, and Marzipan. But the preacher who gets John the Baptist? Well, that person gets to call listeners a broods of vipers and utter dire warnings about axes laid at the root of barren trees that are about to be chopped down and thrown into the fire. None of that is jingle bells happy; none of it makes you want to start humming "Away in the Manger".

Yet I've been drawn to John the Baptiser in our Markan text for three reasons: first, I was asked to speak on it and that allows for its own focus (and Mark doesn't refer to axes or vipers by the way); second, a recent issue of *Canadian Mennonite* carried a homily on John the Baptist that I can most charitably describe as odd. I thought it deserved a positive response; and lastly, I carry within me the memory of every Orthodox iconostasis that I've ever seen, and on every one there stands John the Baptist front and almost centre and right beside our Lord. His clothes are in tatters, his beard scraggly, his head bowed in reverence and his hand beckoning us to the Lord of all creation; the one whose sandals he is eternally unworthy to untie; as are we.

Not surprisingly then, I have found myself wondering if John the Baptist might have something to say to us who are not Orthodox. So who was he? For starters, there was never a time when John did not know that Jesus was Lord. After all, he leaps with joy in his mother's womb when Mary comes to visit Elizabeth at a time when both women are pregnant. The meaning of John's joy *in utero* is clear to his expectant mom, who cries out to Mary in Luke 1:43 "*And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?*" Every 1st century hearer of these words would have understood instantly that John is making known through his soon-to-be mom that the child to be born of Mary will be none other than God himself. After all, the last half of the Old Testament writings had long replaced the earlier naming of God as *Yahweh* with

that of God as *Lord* (23rd Psalm for instance). Now the unborn John makes that same declaration of the babe in Mary's womb.

Such information is almost too astonishing for our ears. So what's next for John? Well, several decades of holy silence follow in the gospels before we meet him again as an adult, in the desert, as Isaiah had prophesied, and as Mark now begins his Gospel. Though we are not told, one has to assume that John knew that this babe born to Mary was himself about to appear. And John knows that he needs to announce his Lord's coming; to prepare the way for his Lord and God.

But why the desert? Those who went out to meet John there would have associated the desert with the place where their ancestors had wandered for 40 years after an Egyptian captivity as God prepared to lead them to the Promised Land. It was in the desert that the Children of Israel confronted both God's unwavering judgement against sin and unfaithfulness, but also His covenantal love and mercy; for one without the other is like the sound of one hand clapping, and here's what's amazing: people flocked to that very place of deprivation in John's time. People willfully entered into that desert solitude in order to prepare themselves, to confront their own sinfulness, to repent, to seek forgiveness, and thereby to prepare themselves to meet the One who was and is without sin; the only One, in fact, who could save them, or anyone really.

Now we who gather here this morning don't live in John's time, for John was martyred already during Christ's earthly life. But we do live in exactly the same time as the writers of our two New Testament writings, because both were written in between the death and resurrection of our Lord on the one hand, and Christ's Second Coming on the other. And so it is with us.

For the season of Advent has only partly been established to prepare us once again for the first coming of Christ, born in manger rude. Even more it is the time when the church encourages us to prepare our lives anew for Christ's second coming in glory, when He will come again to judge the living and the dead, and bring time itself to an end. Herein arises a problem: we know how to prepare our homes for Christmas, with decoration and Christmas trees; with candles and chestnuts roasting over open fires. But how do we prepare our hearts and our homes for Christ's return in glory, when He will reclaim a universe that He brought into being in the first place?

There is much that one might say about this, but I want to tease out a single verse from our readings this morning, from 2nd Peter 3: 9. In the first few verses of this chapter, verses that our present Governor General would do well to read and ponder, Peter responds to those who doubt the end of the world will be consummated when Christ returns. If so, why is it taking him so long, Peter wonders rhetorically? Then verse 9: *“The Lord is not slow in his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”*

The apostle Peter’s meaning is unmistakable, both for readers then and now: Christ is unquestionably coming again in Glory, and those who find themselves waiting in A.D. 66 or 2017 will not wait in vain. But this waiting for Christ’s return is not a passive matter, for we are to use this in-between time as one in which we come to repentance, so that none will perish. Peter makes it clear, in other words, that our call in our time is one and the same with John the Baptist’s call in his. We too are called to prepare the way for our Lord God, to make straight in the desert a highway so that the glory of the Lord can be revealed. The hard part, it seems to me, is for us to follow John the Baptizer’s example – to enter the desert so that we might first prepare our own hearts for the coming of the One whose sandals we are unworthy to untie.

For we are all so comfortably at home and acculturated in this existential wasteland we call the modern age, one that masks its ultimate meaninglessness with constant, mind numbing activity, which is the point of course. Ironically, we can be our own worst enemies on this, as the Advent season can feel like the busiest time of the year even though it should be among the most prayerfully reflective seasons. For we need the silence of the desert to get our bearings, to turn again to Jesus the Lord as we await His second coming in matchless Glory. We need the silence of the desert so as to reflect and repent of all that stops us from living lives of discipleship in His name right now.

God grant us the grace and courage in this Advent season to stop long enough so that our souls can enter into our own desert wilderness, just as John the baptizer once did on Jordan’s banks. And in the words of the hymn that we will shortly sing in response, *“Then cleansed be every life from sin! Make straight the way for God within, and let us all our hearts prepare for Christ to come and enter there.”* Amen.