

2nd Sunday of Advent Year B
December 4, 2011
St. Luke Sheboygan Falls
Mark 1:1-8

Dialogue with John the Baptist

JOHN (walking down center aisle): Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight!

Prepare the way of the Lord!

PASTOR: Hey there! Who are you?

JOHN: My name is John, son of Zachariah and Elizabeth. I am known by many in Judea as John the baptizer.

PASTOR: What are you doing here then?

JOHN: I'm here to baptize people, of course. And to preach. **(to congregation)** REPENT! Confess your sins and change your ways. God's kingdom is coming soon! Come and be baptized! **(looks around in confusion)** Wait a second. Where's the river?

PASTOR: There is no river. You're indoors. Most of these people have already been baptized. **(walks to font)** Over here in this baptismal font.

JOHN: Really? It doesn't look big enough to even dip a baby's toe.

PASTOR: In our church we usually baptize babies so that their sins are forgiven and they are part of God's family all of their lives.

JOHN: Hmm. That's awesome. So everyone from the youngest to the oldest are preparing the way of the Lord.

PASTOR: I suppose you could say that. That's what we're been talking about today, getting ready for the Lord. How would you say you do that?

JOHN: Everywhere I go I preach about God. You see, someone is coming after me who is greater than me. I'm not even worthy to untie his sandals. No one is. So you all need to get ready. Confess your sins and receive God's forgiveness. Then when the Lord comes you will be ready to follow him.

PASTOR: But John, we've been getting ready—cleaning and decorating our houses, buying and wrapping presents, baking cookies...

JOHN: I don't know anything about cookies or presents. I do know that God wants us to get our hearts ready to receive the coming kingdom.

PASTOR: Our hearts ready? How do we do that?

JOHN: Haven't you been listening? Repent! Think about what you've done wrong and how you have turned away from God and broken God's commandments. Then ask for forgiveness and God will help you live the life God wants you to live. Your preparation is all on the outside. God sent me to tell people to get ready for Him on the inside.

PASTOR: So getting ready on the inside is just as important as getting ready on the outside?

JOHN: Well, duh...

PASTOR: It just seems a lot harder, that's all.

JOHN: I don't think it's harder. It takes more time—time to think, time to reflect, time to pray, time to spend with God.

PASTOR: I guess. But we're all so busy, especially this time of year.

JOHN: Buying things and cleaning things and making what did you say, "cookies"? I say clean your heart and make it ready for God. Nothing else is as important.

PASTOR: When you put it that way, it makes sense. After all, nothing is more important than our relationship with God.

JOHN: Well, again, duh...

PASTOR: You'd be surprised how few people today get that straight.

JOHN: Honestly, not so much. Why do you think I do what I do? The people in Jerusalem get busy too with their buying and their cleaning and their cooking. Too busy to have God in their life. They need a wakeup call too. They needed someone like me to say, "Straighten up your lives! Straighten up your hearts! The Lord is coming!"

PASTOR: We need to be reminded too. Do you think you could stick around for a while?

JOHN: No can do. I'm needed in Judea. But that's what you all need to be doing.

PASTOR: I'm not so sure about that. I don't think I can rock the camel's hair coat that way you do, John.

JOHN: Flattery will get you nowhere. I've got a job to do. I'll give you a hint, it's not about drawing attention to yourself with a crazy get up like mine. It's about leading other people to the Lord and everybody here has their own style of doing that. When you take time to get ready on the inside by spending time with God the outside part will come.

PASTOR: I suppose I knew that, John, but thanks for the wakeup call. We all need that at times.

JOHN: Well, I'm afraid I have to get going. I'm getting a little hungry and I have to hunt up some grub. Do you know where I can find some grasshoppers and honey?

PASTOR: Good luck with that, John. I don't think McDonald's has that on the extra value menu. Thanks for coming.

JOHN (exits): Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight! Repent and be forgiven!

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our redeemer. AMEN.

“Amazing grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.”

Bruce Banner is a mild-mannered scientist who fell prey to dangerous levels of radioactivity. Now whenever he is provoked he warns “I’m getting angry. You’re not gonna like me when I’m angry” as he morphs into a muscular and dangerous green creature known as the Incredible Hulk.

In today’s gospel we find out what happens when Jesus is provoked to anger. We are most comfortable with the Bible’s depiction of Jesus as meek and mild-mannered. We don’t quite know what to do with an angry Jesus.

Jesus arrived at the temple just in time for the Jewish Passover and he was not happy with what he found there. Out in the temple courtyard, the only place where the Gentiles were allowed to come and pray Jesus was surrounded by a noisy, disorganized ruckus. Pilgrims travelled from far away to worship and make sacrifices at the temple and so it wasn’t practical to bring their own animals for an offering. So enterprising merchants pushed the Gentile worshippers out so they could make a fast denarius selling animals for sacrifice. The courtyard was more like a petting zoo than a house of worship.

Jesus was furious. He didn’t turn green, but the sellers certainly didn’t like him. He drove all of the sheep and cattle out with a whip, set the doves free and poured out their money and overturned their tables. ***“Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”***

The issue here for us today is what ignited Jesus’ anger. Do we need to be concerned about selling Easter flowers or Scrip in the church basement? What about our annual chili supper or rummage sale? Does Jesus’ reaction to the money changing in the temple call those practices into question?

Or is allowing animals into the house of God the problem? If that's the case, it would mean that our African friends should reconsider their practice of bringing chickens, goats and cows into the church as a part of their offering to God.

It's helpful for us that one of our other lessons for today is the giving of the Ten Commandments to the Hebrews in Exodus 20. Jesus' anger stemmed from the fact that the very foundation of the law was being violated. By buying and selling on the temple grounds, the merchants were barring other people's access, naming the Gentiles to the worship of God. Not only that, but they were using the religious practice of sacrificial worship for their own financial gain. It was this gross violation of the first commandment to love and worship God above all else that made Jesus furious.

So when we buy or sell things in the church, we need to carefully consider what is the purpose that we serve? Is it for the personal gain of the seller? Or is it for the good of others of the church? Does it stand in the way of meaningful worship? Things like Scrip are ways that we can incorporate giving to the church into purchases we make every day at the store which keeps us more aware of how God is woven into the fabric of our lives. As for chili suppers and rummage sales, I am often proud of how so much of the money we make goes to help causes in the community like the fire dept., diabetes and cancer research—part of our calling as Christians is to be about doing God's work in the world. Of course, we need to balance that with the primary function of the church as a place of worship and praise of God.

The question is, what would rouse God's anger in this world today? Again, I don't think we need to look any farther than the Ten Commandments. God wants to come first in our lives. ***"For I the Lord am a jealous God, punishing children for the sin of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments."***

What angered Jesus then is the same thing that makes God angry now, all of the things that stand in the way of true worship and a deeper, stronger, more meaningful relationship with him. Some of those things have to do with our money, but not necessarily how we use it within these walls, but how it takes us away from our focus on God. Just as important for us today, our time has become a sign of what is significant in our lives. The activities and people we choose to spend our time on, become our gods. It distresses God when our focus shifts more and more away from him as we decide what to use our precious on. Sometimes running, running, running and letting it fritter away without giving it much thought.

It may make us uncomfortable, to see Jesus get angry. It may shatter a few misconceptions, but it is healthy for us to realize that God doesn't accept and condone everything we do. God's gave us the Law for a reason.

When God first gave the Law to the Hebrews it was not meant to be a burden, but a gift. God had freed his people from slavery in Egypt, then fed them in the wilderness, then finally, God gave the law to show them how to live as God's chosen ones.

The problem is that from the start, they failed to keep it. Even as Moses carried the tablets down Mt. Sinai, the Hebrews had created a golden calf and were worshipping it.