

Who Is John?
One Who Points to Jesus!
John 1:19-28

Adapted from a sermon by Rev. Chad L. Bird - St. Paul Lutheran Church, Wellston, OK

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

John the Baptist is uncivilized. He's disgusting!! A man with locust legs stuck between his teeth would never rank on Ms. Manners top ten list. A man whose hair remains untouched by scissors since his youth would never be hired by a Fortune 500 company. A man whose wardrobe consisted only of camel's hair would never make the cover of GQ. John is uncivilized.

He makes you uncomfortable, doesn't he? He's the kind of person you think you have to make apologies for: "Oh, yes, John, he is a bit eccentric, a little off-the-wall, not your run-of-the-mill biblical figure. You just have to look past a few things, that's all. I'm sure deep down he's a very normal person." But, to tell the truth, mamas don't want their babies to grow up to be John the Baptists; as the song goes, let 'em be doctors and lawyers and such.

Why does John make you uncomfortable? You know. It's not just the clothing; it's not the hair; it's not even the diet, really. John the Baptist is uncivilized, that's the problem. He doesn't live in a three-bedroom house with a white-picket fence and a two-car garage. He didn't marry his high school sweetheart and raise two lovely children. He did not buy his clothes at JC Penny or Walmart, nor did he get his groceries from Econo Foods or Charlies, I don't think they even carry chocolate-covered locusts, much less the kind John ate. John didn't even hold down a job.

John turned his back on both city and village, John lived in the wilderness, the Judean wild country his un-walled bedroom. Although entitled to the priesthood, John's temple is the desert, his altar the Jordan River, his vestments animal hides.

Although he is the culmination of the OT prophets and--as Jesus said--the greatest man ever born of a woman, John spits in the face of flattery, deeming himself unworthy even to untie the shoestrings of the Messiah with his sinful fingers. John is everything that civilized sinners do not want to be.

"Who are you, John?" That is what the civilized priests and Levites want to know. "I am not the Christ," John emphatically answers. "What then, are you Elijah?" "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" "No." "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" Humble John has nothing to say about himself, so, thankfully, Isaiah the prophet has already spoken for him: "I am 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the Lord.'""

John is the forerunner, the one who trots ahead of the Messiah to announce His coming. He is the advent man, the preacher who prepares you for Christ. John is what the psychiatrist would call a monomaniac--someone with an excessive interest, or irrational preoccupation with just one subject. We might say that he has a one-track mind! He is monomaniac about Christ! That is a description that fits John to a tee.

"Who are you, John?" "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord." Why in the wilderness, John? What's so important about the desert? Why not build a church in the civilized section of the country or at least erect a pulpit on the street corner? Good grief, John, why not just get some air time on a Christian radio station or half an hour on the Religious Broadcasting Network so we could sit in our living room recliners and ponder your message? Why must we travel out to the wilderness?

But John the Baptist is unrelenting: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness." John beckons you away from that place called civilization where civilized sinners are all too easily duped by demons into believing the lie. "Leave," John calls. Leave that place where you are easily tricked into believing that your job is your life, your family is your life, your possessions are your life. "Leave," John cries, Leave that place where trivial pursuit is not just a game but a way of life. "Leave," John preaches. Leave that place where death masquerades as life, where the person who is "living it up" has made pleasure into a god, where the person who is said to have lived a "full life" may never have been baptized, where "real life" has nothing to do with Christ but with the daily grind of the common man. "Leave," John demands. Leave that place where people think they have civilized sin, but where, in fact, sin has transformed them into savages at heart.

There is part of you that is uncomfortable with John . . . no, there is part of you that hates John the Baptist. The ugly Old Adam in you hates to be stripped naked and made to stand ashamed in front of the mirror of the law. The old Adam in you loathes John. John lays bare how comfortable you've become with your love of mammon, how adept you are at blaming others for your shortcoming, how easy you are on yourselves.

The preacher's sandpaper words are much too abrasive for your civilized hearts. His preaching grates on your modern sensitivities. But John will preach no Walt Disney version of the law. He is "calling you to repentance, that you might escape from the wrath to be revealed when Christ comes again in glory,"(Preface).

John beckons you out of civilization into the wilderness of repentance. To live a life of repentance is to sit at John's feet in the desert sand. And what do you see in this wilderness of repentance? Barrenness stares blankly at you; the hollow eyes of death peer into your soul. When you go to St. John in the desert, into the solitude of reflection, into the painful stillness where you are utterly alone with the law of God, there your eyes behold with clarity the desert of your own heart, filled only with the wild monsters of your sins.

Sit in the dust of this wilderness; pick up a handful of dirt, watch it trickle between your fingers, and behold your origin and your end. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. There, in the wilderness of repentance, where the pride of life is absent and the humility of death pervasive, there confess what you see: "I, a poor miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities. With which I have ever offended Thee and justly deserved Thy temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them."

John calls you out into the wilderness, into the barren desert, where the only place there is life is

where there is water. St. John the Baptist, we call him. He's the water-man. John beckons you out of the civilization of sin, into the wilderness of repentance, to lead you ultimately to the river of life. Once he's gotten you to the water, he's done his job. For there, standing in the oasis of the Font, is your Savior, Jesus Christ. John points and says, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away your sin. Behold, the Lamb of God, who gives you the new life, the life of forgiveness, the life of absolution in the water of Baptism."

Hunter was brought to that water today, brought to Christ. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit He was baptized into Christ. Hunter was cleansed of sin, united to Christ's death, and raised to new life.

Ever since the day John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, our Lord has been found in the water. He locates Himself there for you. Flowing through the desert of repentance is this Water of life. There, your conscience which burns with the heat of sins committed, finds the soothing coolness of sins forgiven. Here, your heart, which is dried and cracked under the blazing sun of the law, finds shade and refreshment in the shadow of the cross. There, your mouth, which is parched from the confession of sins, is filled with the sweet drink of the compassion of God. Our Lord is found in the river of absolution. Come to Him. Drink of Him. Bathe, swim, soak in this fountain of immortality.

Your Lord has been baptized in blood, sprinkled on the Font of the cross as He was pierced for you. A soldier braced himself and thrust his cruel spear upward into the side of our blood-bathed God. That spear opened the fountain of His flesh and out flowed a river of blood and water, one fork of the flow filling the chalice, the other the Font. When you desire forgiveness, you go to the blood, for God declares that without blood there is no forgiveness. The life of God is in the blood of His Son and that life-giving blood is in the Chalice, the Font, the Absolution. Go to them for forgiveness. Go to them for life. Go to them for God.

The only true and lasting life is in the wilderness of repentance for there alone flows the Jordan River. Only in the water to which Christ has tied Himself is there life. It is in the baptismal life that penitents truly "live it up," really have the "full life," and live the "real life" in Christ. Living in our baptism, the trivial is not pursued but the eternal is found. In daily contrition and repentance, the shame of sin is removed by the name of the Forgiving One. It is in water where the uncivilized John the Baptist places us into Christ's keeping, where He prepares us to be citizens of the heavenly fatherland. Amen.