

Mark 1:1-8

Think about the times when you have applied for a job and were asked the question, "Tell me about yourself", how did you respond? Did you begin by saying who your parents are and where you were born? Not usually, you usually begin with your work experience, putting an emphasis on what you hope will best qualify you for the job for which you are applying.

That's exactly where Mark begins in his gospel, the reading we just heard. He's starting in the middle of the story, fairly close to the end actually, and he is giving the qualifications for Jesus as the Messiah. Mark doesn't begin with a birth narrative; he jumps right into where the prophet cries out in the wilderness the promise of God that began in Isaiah. A comfort is coming to God's people, inequality will be eliminated, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. The people coming to hear John the Baptist heard this message of hope.

We are told that John was in the wilderness. When I think of wilderness I think of wide open spaces, or I think of somewhere no one ventures because of the wild nature of the area. Yet here wilderness means "not urban". John was not in a town, he was out next to the Jordan River, a place where many people would be visiting for one reason or another. Once someone saw him and heard him proclaiming repentance and the promise of the One more powerful than him coming soon, they would tell others about this strange new prophet and even more people would make the trip to the Jordan to see and hear this prophet.

And the people knew that John held the one who was coming in high esteem because he said he was not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. Feet were considered the most unclean part of the body, with good reason. Sanitation was not what it is today, and animals were abundant. Sandals were the footwear of the day, leaving most of the foot bare. This, combined with the dirt and mud from the road made feet something no one intentionally wanted to touch. Only the lowliest of the lowly servants touched a man's feet because they were forced to. When John says he is unworthy to untie the thongs of his sandals, John is saying that he is lower than the lowliest servant. So the One John is describing as coming after him is someone very special, someone who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. The Jewish people were familiar with the Holy Spirit, even though it hadn't come to live with humans until after the ascension of Jesus. The Spirit is mentioned throughout the Hebrew Bible, better known to us as the Old Testament.

What hope this must have brought the people! Knowing that there would soon be a Savior, someone who would again connect them to God's power and might. They were looking for a warrior king, one who would lead them into a victorious battle against the Roman empire. The Word of God was being spoken in the wilderness, just as Isaiah had predicted.

This reminds us that even though we symbolize God's coming into the world with a celebration of a baby born in a humble manger, we aren't expecting Christ to come into the world in the same way again. We are looking for a means of arrival that will be recognized by all people of every nation. The way in which the prophets seemed to have understood the day of the Lord can be arranged into three categories. The first of these is the warning that the day of the Lord will be a time of judgment against the nations that have attacked or threatened Israel. The second category also relates to a punishment or judgment of God, but in this case the object of God's wrath is Israel; the day of the Lord will bring God's wrath against his people for their failure to keep the covenant. The third use of the day of the Lord by the prophets is much more positive. In these instances, the day of the Lord will bring redemption and blessings for Israel, and, in some texts, also for the nations and the entire created order. The good news is

that as Christ followers we are included in the nations receiving redemption and blessings. Today's reading from 2 Peter tells us that the Lord is not slow about his promise, but his return is delayed with the hope that more people will come to repentance.

How often is our hope based on another person repenting and turning to God for salvation? I don't hear that thought very often. I have heard it said that 'I hope I make the final cut'. I believe that is the hope of most people. We find that we have begun to hope only for our own souls. And yes, we do need to be concerned for ourselves, but we also need to care about other people finding the hope of Christ.

I think people are trying to extend the Christmas season because it brings a sense of hope. A hope for the peacefulness of the night before Christmas. A hope for presents under the tree. A hope that a feeling of joy will permeate the world like it seems to at Christmas time. There was a new Christmas song out a couple of years ago asking, "Why Can't it be Christmas time all Year"? The lyrics talk about a happy time of year, joy around, carols by the fire, family, all the sentimental times we think Christmas is supposed to be about, but rarely is. Notice this description of Christmas had nothing to do with the birth of Christ, and that is where our true hope, peace, joy, and love is found.

How do we spread the true message of Christmas? Perhaps, if you do send out Christmas cards, sending the "religious" ones to everyone, not just your religious friends. Perhaps by having a display of a manger as a Christmas decoration in front of your home. Going around singing Christmas carols. One of the ways I found great joy in the past week was when listening to one of the local radio stations that has people phone in Christmas greetings for friends and family there was a greeting from a grandmother wishing her grandchildren a merry Christmas and reminding them that "Jesus is the reason for the season." Small, subtle ways of bringing God back into the picture, not the, what we would consider outlandish, behavior of John the Baptist announcing the coming of Jesus.

Yet he certainly did draw a crowd out there by the Jordan River dressed in camel's hair and a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey, loudly proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism wasn't a foreign idea to the people of Jesus' time. The Essenes, which the clothing and eating practices of John the Baptist resembled, were baptizing people; immersion into water was also one of the Judean cleanliness rituals, so baptism wasn't new with John the Baptist. What was new was that John was the voice in the wilderness crying out that God's word from Isaiah would be fulfilled, that a new majestic powerful One was on the way to baptize with the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist brought hope to a people who were looking for God to come to them. This Advent John the Baptist brings us a message of hope as well as we remember that in this season we are to prepare for Jesus to come into the world again. Once he came into this world born as a baby, fully human and fully God. He came to take away our sin, to show us how to live, to draw us closer to God and to one another. One day Christ will return with power and majesty, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed as the world recognizes him for who he is; until that day we remember and celebrate the hope that came in the form of a baby. All glory be to God.