

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

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Year A

The beginning of the good news...

I've never heard of anyone whose absolutely most favorite personality in the Gospel stories was John the Baptist. Have you? I mean, can you imagine *yourself* by foot, or even by donkey, making the trek out into the middle of the burning desert, filling as many water bottles as your backpack could carry, risking the notorious hideouts of bandits along the way, just to hear *John* preach and bellow at you?

As if John's words weren't fiery enough, the hot, dry, desert wind swallowed up every thing and every sound, continually changing the shape of the desert floor beyond recognition. There was no hiding from the elements there. No hiding, period. And even if John's preaching style didn't put you off, his voice would have – rough and terribly hoarse from vocal cords that were permanently scorched by shouting too much and too long in such an empty space where every sound was so soon lost on the wind.

He was dressed like a cave man, they say, in clothes the prophet Elijah might have worn 800 years before: camel skins pieced together and bound at the waist with a band of leather. From his birth John had been consecrated a Nazirite, a person whose dedication to God included living as far away from society as possible and never, ever cutting his hair or trimming his beard. By the time we meet him he is about 30 years old and as wild as the wasteland he has chosen for his home. It is true that locusts are a very high source of protein, but a diet of whatever locusts and wild honey could be found would not have put much flesh on his bones. He was skinny and scary-looking.

There was nothing beautiful or gentle or heartening about John the Baptist. And yet, Mark's Gospel uses some of the sweetest and most wooing words from all of Hebrew scripture as a kind of "voice-over" to open this scene with John. *Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem... I am 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... For your God will come and He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.* This doesn't sound much like the John the Baptist we know, does it?

But Mark also tells us that crowds from all over the place came to hear him. From the farthest reaches of the *Judean countryside and from Jerusalem*, people left their plowing and their baking, their work and their play, just so they could hear this prophet, and be in his presence.

And, Mark says that this man - and his fiery message: *You must prepare. Clear the way, make room. Grade a triumphal highway for God, flat and straight to your heart, with no more twists and turns, no hills or valleys, no barriers at all. The Lord is coming and there is no place to hide. Everything about us shall be totally revealed* - Mark says, *This* [man and this message] *This* is the beginning of the good news of Jesus...

And the Church says, If we are on our way to Bethlehem for Christmas, we have to start here, in the desert with John the Baptist. Why? Why do we have to, and why did all those crowds come to listen to this very difficult preacher and be baptized in the Jordan by him?

I think, because of what he offered them and what he offers us. John's rough and radical all-or-nothing presence offered the light of the fiery presence of God, a light that allowed no shadowy room for deceiving or being deceived. He offered a place where no one could hide, where everything was true and only true, a place to come clean because there was nothing else to do in the presence of John, God's desert bonfire. And just as he did for those first crowds we hear about, he is providing a place to for *us* to confess all that ails us, a place for us to stop pretending we are anything but who and what we truly are, a place for us to wash all the rest off and start over, begin again.

The way to the comfort and tenderness and leading and glory of our God that Isaiah and John call us to is through the desert, through the wilderness where there is nothing but ourselves and God - no distortion, no busyness, no hiding, no false priorities, no pettiness, no irresponsibility for our words and actions; only confession and forgiveness and the beginning of a new life.

Wherever and whatever our desert wilderness may be, the question it holds for us is: Do we really believe we can begin again, start over as a new creation, with a clear path, straight into our heart, for God to be born into our lives? Isaiah believed it; John the Baptist believed it; and the *One he knew was coming after him* believed it. But, do you and I believe it?

I can tell you from my years of ministry – before and after ordination – most people do not really believe it is possible to be transformed, to begin again, open and clean, to be a new creation. I can also tell you that I have seen that very wonder take place before my eyes, over and over again. I have watched when, just as the psalmist says, *Mercy and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.*

It isn't that we can't get to Bethlehem without beginning in the desert. We can certainly get to Bethlehem and not go through the desert. But when we get there it won't be Christmas, because there will not be room in us for the baby to be born, for the forever Word of God to fill our emptiness – fill it with light and truth and comfort and joy.

We must prepare, clear the way, make room in our lives and hearts, space for the *God* who comes to be *with us*. Empty our hearts, clear away anything that blocks God's way, *make every mountain and hill low and every valley lifted up, make all the rough places plain*, wash it all off, so that there is a highway for our God, straight into our heart, and *the glory of the Lord shall be revealed!* It's there already, waiting for us to recognize it.

This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.