

12/03 - "The Journey of John"

Mark 1:1-3

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,

2 as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

**"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way"—**

3 "a voice of one calling in the wilderness,

**'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'**"

Special Music: "O come, O come, Emmanuel" Peter Hollens

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zshzkkD-NYA>



BE THE VOICE

Do you hear the voice?

“Prepare the way of the Lord.”

Do you hear the voice?

“Make straight paths for him.”

Do you hear the voice

Exclaiming, proclaiming

That Messiah is coming?

Do you hear the voice?

Are your ears attuned

To the whistling wind

The breath of God

As it portends

The arrival of the mystery

The greatest event in history,

The arrival of God’s son on earth

Joyous cries

Amidst the agony of the virgin birth?

Can you hear the voice

Telling one and all

That the light streaming

From a cattle stall

Will change the world

In unimaginable ways.

But only if we listen

And we believe

What this child will soon achieve

**As he comes of age
And brings new light
To our weary, dreary
Damaged plight.
O come, O come Emmanuel!
God is with us.
Listen above the fuss
And the joyous chorus.
Can you hear it?
Can you speak it?
Are you the voice
Crying in the wilderness
Calling one and all
To answer heaven's call?
"Make straight the paths for him!"
Sing it bright to the delight
Of Cherubim and Seraphim.
"Behold the light of the world!"
Are you the voice that can be heard
By ears in dark and silent places,
Speaking grace to the vanished faces
Of the people who sit waiting,
Anticipating,
The glory of the coming of the Lord
Is your voice
Joined with the chorus
Of those that believe,
Of those who intercede**

**With the Creator
On this so noble
And silent night.
Be that voice.
BE THE VOICE!**

At the end of the 19th century, many people felt they were living at the greatest moment in time for humankind as so many inventors created ways for people to save time and energy, new ways to ease the burden so heavy on the shoulders of the common man. Steam power gave rise to so many new ways to travel, from ships, to trains, to automobiles. Alexander Graham Bell was delivering on his promise of telephones for the masses. Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla were in a somewhat unorthodox battle over the virtues and dangers of Alternate Current versus Direct Current as power plants were being built to bring electricity to businesses and homes. With the progress of electricity came innovations in home appliances and lighting. Everywhere people looked, changes were being taking place to the fabric of people's lives as they lived inside this Utopian bubble, awaiting their opportunity to engage with the world in new and exciting ways.

Not the least of these innovations at the time was the rise of the automobile. But people saw the automobile as a novelty, a fad. It had to be as such because the price of an automobile, steam or gasoline powered, was so expensive. At the time, both steam powered and gasoline powered engines were being used as the industry fought to find a standard. That was, until Henry Ford built the first gasoline powered automobile manufacturing plant in Detroit, which came on line in 1913, allowing the production of Model T's to go from hundreds a day to thousands a day. Suddenly, vehicles were available to the masses rather than just to the rich.

Not everyone saw the invention of the automobile as a good thing. A great deal of that anxiety came from the fact that, although people stood stupefied at the changes invading their everyday lives, they were not necessarily embracing all that change. And the change from horse, buggy, and wagon, to automobile left many people quite skeptical of the new mode of transportation.

In 1898, the state of Vermont passed a law that gave credence to the fear that so many had of these new machines. It was common in those days that farmers would herd their sheep and cattle down the same roads that had been built for horses, buggies, and wagons. No one at the time could envision the possibility of something like an automobile having any value for a farmer. After all, the horse and wagon worked just fine for their needs. If it isn't broke, don't fix it. But Vermont saw a problem with having herds of cattle and sheep being herded on the same road that might also see an occasional automobile. Because the balance of needed transportation fell on the side of the horse and buggy since the infrastructure already existed to support it, there had not been time to adapt that infrastructure for self-powered vehicles. So, like I said, they passed a law and it read like this:

"The owner or person in charge of a carriage, vehicle or engine propelled by steam, except road rollers" must have a "person of mature age [...] at least one eighth of a mile in advance of" the vehicle, to warn those with livestock of its impending arrival. If at night, it also required the

aforementioned person to carry a red light. The law did not apply to rail vehicles."

It is hard for us to imagine seeing any sense in that law, but that is because we are looking at the law from where a future has shown us that such a law is impractical. But the farmers thought it was a pretty good law. However, the people that owned the automobiles, the wealthiest and most influential people around, did have a problem with the law. The law that was supposed to protect the farmers has slowed the development of industry in Vermont so much that it almost extinguished the use of the self-powered vehicle in the state. So, within two years the law was repealed. In a capitalist society, the wealthy often get their way.

Why do I tell you this story? I want you to pretend that you are a flagman in 1898. Your sole job is to walk down a road staying at least an eighth of a mile ahead of an automobile to make sure the path is clear for the vehicle coming behind you. You often can't even see that vehicle. There are turns, hills, trees, buildings that obscure your vision of the vehicle. But you have to make sure that you are walking fast enough that the automobile that you are responsible for doesn't catch up with you. But you also have to walk slow enough that you don't bend the boundaries of an eighth of a mile too much. You are to announce the coming of the vehicle to anyone else on the road and tell them to clear the path. That includes anyone with herds of cattle or sheep. It isn't an easy or empowering job. It doesn't take a long time for you to begin to realize as you are walking along, that your purpose isn't about you at all, it's about the vehicle

behind you. As a matter of fact, you could easily begin to realize the silliness of the law involved, and that you really don't feel much purpose at all in what you are doing. But boy, do you have a great deal of time to think on such absurd matters.

We often think of John the Baptist as an older man with a scraggly beard, somewhat portly in build, dressed in ragged robes, living off of locusts and honey in the middle of the desert. For some reason, when I think of John this way, Friar Tuck from Robin Hood comes to mind. I do want to challenge that notion just a little bit. John was only a few months older than Jesus. I'm pretty sure that he didn't get fat living off locusts and honey. He was a Levite because his father and mother were both of the lineage of Aaron, but the Bible never tells us that he was assigned any temple duties.

John chose a life in the desert to be closer to the common people. The message that he brought of the coming of the Messiah was meant for all of Israel, not just the elite, and this was his way of ensuring that the message reached all people. His circle of influence was much larger simply because he was not confined by the walls of a city. By delivering his message this way, distancing himself from the religious leaders, he became a hero to the people. He was a people's priest. Non-traditional. This made the powers-that-be uncomfortable. He became so popular that it was feared that he would cause the people to rise up in rebellion. He also called out the transgressions of Herod Antipas, which is why he was led off to jail and eventually beheaded.

John performed baptisms in the desert, baptism being a common Jewish expression of repentance of one's sins and the ritual cleansing, the washing away of those sins. As he preached and taught the people, his main message can be found in John 1:27:

“He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”

By serving in the capacity of the people's priest, his expanding congregation allowed him the ability to take his message to as many people as possible. John's ministry was well established by the time Jesus comes to him to be baptized, and it was during Jesus' three-year ministry that John was arrested and beheaded.

While it is possible that John and Jesus interacted at some time before Jesus began his ministry, the Bible doesn't discuss it. They were cousins and Jesus' mother, Mary, was close to her relative Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, so it is possible that they did enjoy each other's company as children at some point.

I find the following story in John extremely interesting and something we don't hear often:

35 The next day John was there again with two of his disciples.

36 When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!”

37 When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus.

38 Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you want?”

They said, “Rabbi” (which means “Teacher”), “where are you staying?”

39 “Come,” he replied, “and you will see.”

So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon.

40 Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus.

41 The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon (Peter) and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ).

42 And he brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which, when translated, is Peter).

We only know the name of one of the two of John’s disciples that followed Jesus that day. It was Andrew, Peter’s brother. And after spending the day with Jesus, Andrew tells his brother Peter, who returns with Andrew to follow Jesus. By this we know that there were disciples of John the Baptist that became disciples of Jesus, which is also outside of our common ways of looking at this period of Jesus’ developing ministry.

The story that most of us are more familiar with is found in Matthew 4:18-20:

18 Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee. He saw two brothers. They were Simon (his other name was Peter) and Andrew, his brother. They were putting a net into the sea for they were fishermen.

19 Jesus said to them, “Follow Me. I will make you fish for men!”

20 At once they left their nets and followed Him.

Once again, we have two stories of the same event told from two different perspectives by two people who wait years before they get around to writing their gospels. It doesn't mean one apostle is right and the other wrong. It just means the events were witnessed by two separate eyes. And remember, both of these stories are told by people at a time before they were called to be disciples, unless, by chance, Matthew or John was the other disciple with Andrew in the story from John the Baptist. But we simply don't know, and no one intentionally threw a monkey wrench into the story to confuse us.

What I really want to take away from all this, is that the journey of John the Baptist was not a journey to Bethlehem. It was not a journey to Jerusalem. It was not a journey that followed standard religious practices. It was not a journey authorized by the religious leaders of the time, nor was it an offshoot to temple worship. While John the Baptist never told anyone to ignore the traditions and values of their heritage, he did explain that changes were about to occur that would get woven into the very fabric of understanding of who God is and his relationship with his people. John was the flagman for a vehicle that he seldom saw coming behind him. And even though he couldn't see Jesus that often, he

always knew that he was there. He was sold on the message that he had been preaching:

“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

The only time we see his faith wavering is when he is in prison, awaiting execution, asking that Jesus validate his message. Things are looking pretty dark and John, just like all of the Israelites, was expecting a different kind of savior, a warrior, a vindicator. It is no wonder that the loving message of Christ might have caused serious doubts for John the Baptist and his followers. John 7:20 reads:

20 When the men came to Jesus, they said, “John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’”

And Jesus replies:

“Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.

23 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

That last verse throws a lot of people. What does Jesus mean by saying **“Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”** Jesus is telling John that he understands that Jesus is not what John was expecting, but he should consider himself blessed to finally understand the truth. The truth that

“God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world, but that through him the world might be saved.”

We are so blessed to be on this side of the cross so that we are able look back on all the wonders that Christ has brought to this world, the greatest being the salvation of our souls, so undeserved by us. Jesus becomes our portal into the very presence of the Creator of the universe, in spite of our transgressions and sins.

As we enter this Advent season and embrace the joy and wonder of the birth of Christ, let us embrace the love that Christ has shown each of us. Let us praise him for coming to us in the form of a human, not only to bring us salvation, but to show us how to live lives that bring glory to our Creator. John stood at the threshold. How exciting a time that must have been. How exciting to know that he was called to proclaim the coming of the long-awaited Messiah.

And how about us? We have the same message. A message based in faith and in history. A message that transcends the glory of humankind and let's us sing of the presence of Jesus Christ in our lives. We love because he first loved us. We live because he first showed us how to live. We have a story to tell. A story to shout at the top of our voices. Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. It is he that came to us to rescue us from the darkness and bring us into the light. Those words should be foremost on our lips as we draw ever closer to our Creator.

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,

2 as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way”—

3 “a voice of one calling in the wilderness,

‘Prepare the way for the Lord,

make straight paths for him.’”

John found his voice. Can we find ours in the chaos that attempts to enslave us and keep us mute? Be the Voice!

God bless you all.

AMEN

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