

Isaiah 11:1-10  
Matthew 3:1-10

Second Sunday of Advent  
December 9, 2007

Marvin Gaye sang the oldie song 'Abraham, Martin, and John'.

Has anybody here,  
Seen my old friend John,  
Can you tell me where he's gone.  
He freed a lot of people,  
but it seems the good die young  
I just looked around  
and he was gone.

The late John F. Kennedy is the focus of that segment of the song. Yet, I wonder if during this special time of the church year, this season of Advent, that perhaps we aren't asking the same question relative to John the baptizer. Where is our friend John?

He's a rather important figure in our Christian faith being that he appears in all four of the gospel narratives as a precursor to the arrival of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of Mark begins immediately with John the Baptist; the Gospel of Luke not only has John the Baptist preparing the way for Christ's arrival, but even tells about him being born to a barren woman named Elizabeth who was Mary's sister. Mary being the mother of Jesus. In the gospel of John, people thought he was the Christ, the anointed one sent by God. Today, in Matthew, he's the single figure on the stage after the drama of the birth narrative of Christ...preparing the way for Christ's ministry.

Yet, for some reason, this important man and his important message of good news, is overlooked, glossed over, and regarded with little, if any, interest as we journey to Bethlehem and Christmas and for Christ's return in glory.

As many of us are well aware, places like Madison Avenue and shopping malls are kicking Christmas into high gear. We need to keep the families of those murdered in that mall in Omaha in our prayers-what a tragedy. The church maintains that Christmas is but a glimmer on the horizon, a promise foretold, a hope longed for, that for which our hearts ache.

Not so much for the gods of profit, margin, inventory, and product control. In this certain religiosity, manger scenes sit everywhere from store shelves to plastic lawn ornaments. The trees are up, or will be up soon. We are bathed in a forest of lights, sales, parties, Christmas cards, and numerous versions of traditional Christmas music. In this festive bubble bath...John is nowhere to be found

He's not in the major shopping centers, not on any Hallmark Christmas cards, or in any festive holiday music. Yet, there is a goodness in those angels, shepherds, and little drummer boys and they are found where the action is. They are found where the action is because they are friendly and marketable.

They connote a Jesus who's cousins might have been well-to-do temple elites, merchants, or even Jerusalem politicians and leaders. Rather that hairy, dirty, fire and brimstone preacher who ate locusts and honey.

The thing is...is that what John uses to deliver his good news, this element of repentance, doesn't sell well these days before Christmas. 'Repentance', changing one's ways isn't popular since it's based on a person having a short coming, a fault, or something unhappy in this festive and joyous time of year. Who wants to, or even has time to, make a subtle change in making his/her life better? Who wants to come to terms with a quality that they are not proud of?

"Children laughing, people passing, meeting smile after smile, and on every street corner you hear silver bells. It's Christmas time in the city."

The Bible reminds us, throughout it's pages, that the great figures of God have never felt comfortable in established places, like a city. The clean, organized, and well-manicured dynamics of a city do not do well in confrontation with outcast, dark skinned, camel hair wearing preachers like John the Baptist.

It's no wonder John did his preaching out in the wilderness, away from the established, mainline city of Jerusalem.

Yet, he was out where he would attract people who were longing for something deeper than the city of Jerusalem could offer, people who wanted a change of direction in their life.

All the while, John is odd. Besides his ridiculous appearance, the virtue of repentance is hard to sell to good folks...good folks like us. Who would want a Christmas card of a homeless looking man...yelling near a river? You'd expect the background to be empty dessert with a few rocks...who would want such an uplifting image around the holidays?

Like a persistent telemarketer, John refuses to go away. He yells from the margins into our fast-paced lives, determined to get our attention. From the wilderness, John calls to us again today, down through the years of history, pointing a scraggly finger in our direction.

He's often been portrayed as an angry fire and brimstone preacher, calling down God's wrath on all who are sinners; with a rigid finger pointing and clenched fist pounding.

But, maybe it's the other way around. Rather, than pointing with a finger implying our guilt and shame...perhaps he is gently waving us over. Perhaps he knows what we in the busy, mainstream of early December holiday life don't know.

That our lives aren't as clean as we think they are. We aren't as good as we would like other's believe. Perhaps we need to step away from all that is happening around us, and take a cold bath in the waters of reality, to remind us that the cute little baby Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Sinners like you and me...and John isn't going to let us forget it.

God's way of salvation is not discovered in the busyness of our daily lives, in the center of cities...but out in the wilderness...and he yearns for us to follow. And like people clamoring for sales on Black Friday...people flocked to John the Baptist...seeking something better for their lives...seeking a positive change.

Preparing for traveling in the wilderness, ‘roughing it’, as many would call it, is hard work. A great deal of time devoted to anticipating what might happen. I remember preparing for the journey of fatherhood. I carried the bag of clothes, the baby clothes, the boom box and relaxing CD’s, the baby carrier, the scented candles, the toiletries...and my wife, well, she didn’t carry much of anything! They said Joseph and Mary were in a little inn...I needed an entire room for all the stuff we carried to prepare for parenthood!

That’s exactly what this season of Advent is all about as we anticipate the coming of God’s anointed one and preparing our lives, changing them if we must, for something new and marvelous to begin.

Living in the wilderness, ‘roughing it’, entails not living your normal life. How fitting for John to be preaching a message of turning your life around, living in a different, more honest, more hopeful way. Since living in the wilderness, it’s all about the essentials. Food and water, a map or guide to lead the way.

That’s it, wilderness life is life that is bare bones, trimmed down...just like John with his sandals, camel news, and uplifting news to share.

And, that’s the way God likes it. Advent is all about the basics...realizing our sin and our need for God’s forgiveness and grace. And receiving that forgiveness and grace.

Perhaps, this strange preacher named John is the only way God can get our attention in this time of year called Advent. Away from the glitzy centers of everything, there is a lot clamoring for our attention. Out in the wilderness, there aren’t as many barriers to go through to get the message heard. We can’t carry our Christmas cards, Christmas lists, bags of gifts out into the wilderness to listen.

Just as the wise men who had to leave their old lives behind and take only what was important to meet the Christ-child. When they encountered God on earth, hearing the voice of God in the cry of a child, in a little town out in the wilderness, they went home changed, renewed, and strengthened.

As we continue during this festive holiday season, I encourage you to also set your sights on the wilderness. The wilderness of our broken world where those innocent people are murdered in that shopping mall, where some families will be grieving the loss of a loved one even more during this time of year, where war persists. The wilderness of your life...where there is a longing for something great or instances where you feel you’ve fallen short.

It is in the wilderness where God’s grace is received.

Jesus didn’t come into the fast-moving lanes of Jerusalem. He came to a place where there were no stop signs, no maps, only the light of a star.

This Advent season, try to get away from the crowds, get away from your old life, and take time to go out into the wilderness. Go out to seize something new.

Where is our old friend John? He’s out in the wilderness, preparing for the Lord’s arrival, and he’s asking us to join him. Amen.

