

John Prepares the Way

Sermon: St. Peter's Cathedral, Helena, Montana

Second Sunday in Advent: December 10, 2017 – God's Preparation of John the Baptist

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Good Morning! This is the Second Sunday of Advent. The theme of this second week of preparation for Christ's birth is always the person of John the Baptist. We will continue to focus on him and his ministry next week as well, hearing from the Gospel of John.

It is John the Baptist who connects the arrival of Jesus with the entire Hebrew tradition. It is John the Baptist, who connects Jesus to the Hebrew Bible from Creation and the covenants of the Patriarchs to Moses, the Law and to all of the Prophets. John the Baptist appears in the tradition of the first prophet, Elijah. We heard from verse 6 of the first chapter of Mark that John was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, eating locusts and wild honey. If you go all the way back to the opening chapter of the Second Book of Kings, Elijah the Tishbite is introduced and described as a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist. John the Baptist connects Jesus to the whole of the Jewish tradition. Without him, Jesus would not have been connected to anyone. He would have just come out of nowhere without any lineage or identity in any tradition.

The famous passage from the 40th chapter of Isaiah which we just heard, is chosen because it connects the prophets not only to the ministry of John the Baptist, but also to the Jewish expectation of the Messiah. The passage is about the end of the Babylonian Exile. The Jews were being told that they were forgiven for their sins and could now go home to their own land and to the home of their God, Jerusalem. The prophet Isaiah declares:

“Comfort ye, Comfort ye my people says your God

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her, that her warfare is over, her iniquity has been pardoned.

The Jews expected that their long-awaited Messiah would bring an end to their exile. Exile to the Jew of Jesus' day meant freedom from occupation by a pagan power in Jerusalem. At the time of Jesus, the pagan occupier of Jerusalem was Rome. So the Jews still felt in Exile. They awaited someone who would free their holy city from the pagans. They awaited a Messiah who would be a military hero, a conqueror in the tradition of David, who would free them from occupation and establish the Jews in their city, forever. The Jewish expectation would not be fulfilled with Jesus because he became the victim of Rome on the cross, not its conqueror. John presented a Messiah no one expected.

John the Baptist, who is the last of the prophets, connects the prophetic tradition to Jesus. What I want to focus on this morning is how God prepared John the Baptist for his unique ministry of presenting Christ to the world. I want to talk about his birth, his upbringing and how God formed him by taking him into the wilderness.

Let me say as an aside, that I am so excited about sharing with you some of what I learned by spending nearly 5 years in Jerusalem, taking people to the holy sites where the important events surrounding our

Lord took place. There was so much to learn, even though I went there as a parish priest and preacher of 37 years! I will be emphasizing these insights in my preaching as well as teaching a course in the Life of Christ on Sunday afternoons beginning January 7.

The passage we heard this morning about John the Baptist begins the Gospel of Mark. John the Baptizer appears in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. There is no nativity story in the Gospel of Mark. But as you know, if you go to the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, you hear about the annunciation of John to his father, the priest Zechariah. Zechariah is old, as is his wife Elizabeth. They live southwest of Jerusalem in the hill country of Judea.

“Both of them are righteous before God and living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren and both were getting on in years.” While Zechariah is taking his turn serving in the Temple, the angel Gabriel appears to him to announce that his wife will bear him a son and you will call his name John. Zechariah does not believe the angel and is struck dumb. Imagine the punishment to a preacher who cannot talk!

The whole story reminds us of another famous birth centuries before in the book of Genesis; namely, the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. They too were advanced in years. The God of Israel is a God of surprises! Elizabeth becomes pregnant and throughout her pregnancy Zechariah is unable to speak.

Six months later the angel Gabriel is sent to a town in Galilee called Nazareth and announces to a young girl who is engaged to a man named Joseph, that she will give birth to the cousin of John the Baptist. The girl's name is Mary. Her son will be called Jesus, the Son of the Most High and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. Her response is ‘Yes’ Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.”

A short time later, Mary journeys to visit her cousin Elizabeth in the hill country of Judea. We call this event, “The Visitation”. In the place of the ‘Visitation’ there is a mosaic depicting Mary on a donkey making her way to Elizabeth's house. The mosaic is described in Latin. And the word for ‘hill country’ in Latin is ‘Montana’!

The site of the visitation is instructive for several reasons. When you enter, you see a magnificent sculpture of Elizabeth greeting Mary. In their joy, their wombs touch each other. It is the first meeting between Jesus and John the Baptist. And then Mary breaks forth in the famous ‘Magnificat’. You can see the words of the Magnificat printed in some 65 languages from countries and peoples all over the world.

There is another painting at this site which you might not think of. It shows the Roman soldiers seeking to kill the infant, John the Baptist, because he is among all those male babies under two years of age whom Herod orders to be slaughtered. The painting depicts the child being hidden from Herod's soldiers.

Near the site is another church which has been built to celebrate the birth and naming of John the Baptist. You all the know the story of how Zechariah is asked to name the child. Since he cannot speak, he is handed a tablet and writes that the child shall be called John. Immediately, his tongue is loosed and he bursts into the famous canticle of the Benedictus.

After John's birth we know very little about his upbringing. But we know that when Jesus baptizes John they are 30 years old. These are the unknown years of both John and Jesus.

How do we get from the birth of John to his coming out of the wilderness? We can only guess at what happened to John the Baptist in those thirty years? How did he grow up? At some point he must have left his parents' home in the Judean hills and lived in the wilderness, because we know from this morning's passage that he 'appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.'

John must have left his parents' comfortable home, trading in his mother's cooking for locusts and wild honey. That must have been some parting from his parents. Imagine their anxiety. Imagine how the faith of both Elizabeth and Zechariah must have been tested with their memory of John's miraculous birth. Imagine carrying their memory of having been told that their son would be destined to be the prophet of the Most High.

What happened to John in the wilderness, that prepared him for his unique calling to prepare the way for Jesus? I want to share with you a wonderful quotation that I learned during a course in the wilderness, taught by a remarkable priest from England. He took us to a monastery in the Judean hills, called 'St. John in the Desert' which was established to honor the formative years of John the Baptist. The quotation is from a nun, Mother Basaleia who said this:

"Any great calling requires a long and careful preparation, in which God prepares the soul."

"Any great calling requires a long and careful preparation, in which God prepares the soul."

The wilderness is a scary place. The weather is harsh, there is little water, food is scarce and there can be wild animals about. It can be a very lonely place, but it can also be a place of solitude where it is much easier to hear God without the distractions of village life. For John, the wilderness became the place where God prepared his soul.

John the Baptist must have received a long and careful preparation to do what he was called to do. Imagine the courage it must have taken to stand up to Herod and condemn him for taking his brother Philip's wife. The scripture is quite clear that he was imprisoned in one of Herod's many palaces, across the Jordan River in the region of Moab. There he was held until Herod entertained his guests with a seductive dance from Salome after which he promised her whatever she wished up to half of his kingdom. She went to her mother who held such a deep grudge against John the Baptist, and she told her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist. Surely John must have wondered where Jesus was in all of this!

We know little of these formative years of John the Baptist, but we know the result. Like Jesus he went into the wilderness to ponder the scriptures, to confront the devil and to sort out his vocation. No doubt he must have learned something about being alone and trusting his God. We have no evidence that he saw Jesus any time between the visitation and Jesus' baptism. His movement would decrease as Jesus became more popular. Eventually, John the Baptist would prepare the way for Jesus by getting out of the way. In one of his most famous sayings from the Gospel of John, the Baptist would learn that 'Jesus must increase. I must decrease.'

There is another aspect of John the Baptist's formation in the wilderness which bears mentioning. The question is often asked whether John the Baptist joined any communities that lived in the desert. It has often been suggested that he was a member of the Qumran community which lived near the Dead Sea, not far from where John baptized in the Jordan River. This is the community which became famous in the middle of the last century when the Dead Sea scrolls were discovered. If John was ever a member, it would have only been temporary, because his message would have been different from the Qumran community. The Qumran community was an isolated, separatist sect which existed apart from the Jewish leadership of its day. Its members separated themselves from the politics of the Jewish leadership, in order to purify themselves for what they thought were the end times.

In contrast, John the Baptist confronted the Jewish leadership and preached a radical message of justice for all. John called the leadership 'a brood of vipers, telling them to bear fruit worthy of repentance'. When people asked him "what then should they do? He answered, 'whoever has two coats must share with them one. Whoever has food must do likewise.' To the tax collectors he said, collect no more than the amount prescribed to you, and to the soldiers he said be content with your wages."

By the time John came out of the wilderness to baptize Jesus, he had his own community of disciples separate from Qumran. He was very clear that he was not the Christ, but was called to identify Jesus as the Christ.

As we prepare for the birth of Christ this Christmas, we give thanks for the faithfulness and courage of John who truly prepared the way for Jesus. When Jesus came to be baptized by John in the River Jordan, years of God's faithfulness had also prepared him for his vocation.

Like both John and Jesus, each of us has a calling as well. All of us have been given a vocation. On this Second Sunday in Advent, as we think about how God prepared John for his calling, may we also ponder the long and careful preparation God has given to each of us in our calling as well. Amen

The Very Rev. Graham Smith