

**Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd      Pastor Scott Trevithick**

Date: December 6, 2020 Year B, Advent 2

Text: Mark 1:1-8 The Proclamation of John the Baptist

Title: The Messenger

Focus: As messenger or prophet John's "job" was to speak truth and deliver God's message. This message was appealing to some and disruptive to others. What is our role as messengers or truth-tellers or how do we respond to messengers and prophets?

**Mark 1:1-8 (NRSV) The Proclamation of John the Baptist**

<sup>1</sup> The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. <sup>2</sup> As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; <sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

<sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with<sup>[w]</sup> water; but he will baptize you with<sup>[h]</sup> the Holy Spirit."

***Those Who Dream***

This is the second Sunday of Advent. Our theme for Advent is "Those Who Dream." I would like to repeat what I said last week about what it means in this context to be a dreamer: Last week I defined that to be a dreamer is to long for a better world.

I went a little further to describe a dreamer as one who connects to God and seeks to understand *God's* dreams for the world and to participate in that which God is doing in the world. Through scripture and prayer and reflecting on the character of God, how can we be a part of God's dreams for the world?

One more thing about being a dreamer: I think in this context, being a dreamer doesn't mean disconnecting from reality or from the world. A dream may come during sleep or when imagining, but then one awakens and connects and takes steps toward that dream. It engages or propels us that we might seek the wholeness which God intends. Or, to put it in the words of last week's Call to Worship, "The power of dreams lies in waking up. . . When we open our eyes, we begin the work of faith." (*Sanctified Art, Call to Worship, Advent 1.*) I think dreaming helps you see the world which God intends and then you can work to build toward that.

This week we continue thinking about "Those Who Dream" with the reading from Mark about John the Baptist or John the baptizer. If *dreaming* is about longing for a better world or longing for and working toward the world which God intends, then how

was John a dreamer? What was his role or what was his dream or his understanding of God's dream?

## Hiring John

To respond to these questions about John, I want you to imagine yourself an HR (Human Resources) placement director—you are a hiring manager. Imagine yourself writing the position description for the job which John holds.

- How would you describe John's job or role in one word?
- If he had a position description what would be the title for that job?

There's a case that could be made for different words, but there is one job title used in Mark and echoed in the reading from Isaiah. If you've got your Bible with you, you can look directly at the passage to check it out: It is **messenger**.

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
 who will prepare your way;  
<sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
 'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
 make his paths straight,'" (Mark 1:2b-3)

Let's think about that and detail that position description a bit: If John is a messenger, then what does that role entail? If we were preparing a full position description, what would be included?

On a formal position description, the categories of information to include would be things like position or job title, accountability, tasks and responsibilities, and required skills.

**Position Title**—what's the job called?

- Messenger

**Accountable to or relates to:** Who are others in the organization to whom this person relates? Do they supervise anybody and to whom do they report?

- To whom does John report or to whom is he responsible? Or to put it another way who does he represent?
  - It may seem obvious, but if John is a messenger, then he delivers a message from God. That's his job and God is the one to whom he is responsible. You could further say that it is not *his* message, but God's message and John is the one who is delivering it.

**Required Skills and Abilities, Education or Experience:** What past experiences indicate that a candidate would be suitable for this job? Answering this requires a little creativity on our part, but I think it totally fits:

- Mark describes the clothing of John: "Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey" (Mark 1:6).

- To us, this might just sound like interesting detail, but of no particular significance other than to suggest he was an unusual character.
- But describing someone's appearance in such detail in the gospels is unusual, so it's worth noticing: To the first-century Jewish person, it would have signaled John's similarity to the prophet Elijah:<sup>1</sup>

Elijah wore similar clothing that set him apart from everyone else: “[Elijah] wore a **garment of haircloth**, with a **girdle of leather about his loins**.” (2 Kings 1:8, RSV).

Being identified as a prophet like Elijah would have signaled something about his role or “job,” too: the role of a prophet is to be a truth-teller. The prophet's job is not so much to foretell the future, as some people may think, but to speak the truth in order to draw people back to God's way.

**Tasks and responsibilities:** More specifically, what does this person do?

“Speaking the truth” gets to John the Messenger's “Tasks and Responsibilities.” As described by both the Isaiah text and again in Mark, John's role as messenger is to help “Prepare the Way of the Lord” and to “make his paths straight.” The message is intended to

make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

<sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.

In other words, there will be a way home, even when there seems to be no way. The messenger or the prophet will help direct us back to God, will help us find our way home.

**Performance evaluation:** if we were at the end of a period of evaluation, how would you summarize John's performance? If his role was to deliver God's message and to see that people heard and understood it, how would you say that he did based on the response described in the text? This of course involves some playful imagination on our part but let's see what we find.

<sup>5</sup> And people from **the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem** were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Wow! John has attracted a lot of people to hear the message he's delivering. Based on the response of the people to John's message (or the message that John delivered,) I'd say that's pretty remarkable.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Kosloski in Aleteia, August 29, 2019. “The spiritual symbolism of John the Baptist's unusual clothing” <https://aleteia.org/2019/08/29/the-spiritual-symbolism-of-john-the-baptists-unusual-clothing/>

Since John's message included the call to *repentance* (v. 4), which is *to turn around, to change one's mind, stop what you're doing and do something else*, then I'd say that how people responded was even more remarkable. Because I don't think telling people they're going the wrong way and to turn around and go this way is an easy message to deliver or easy to hear.

How do you account for that? How do you account for his appeal and the great number of people came out to see him? I asked the Tuesday Bible study group about that: "Why do you think that so many were going out to see John and be baptized?" (v. 5).

One factor they mentioned was **curiosity**: "Who was this guy? He just came out of the wilderness. Wow--he's dressed in animal skins and was eating locusts and wild honey. Sounds like we gotta check this out."

I'm sure that was part of the appeal; he was an interesting character who captured people's attention--maybe starting with his appearance.

Another factor the Bible study group mentioned to describe John's appeal was beyond mere curiosity. "The message was received by people needing forgiveness. It was understood as forgiveness and freedom."

The content of his message would have been understood as freedom for people. The message of repentance is not just calling people to repentance alone, but to recognize the freedom that comes from forgiveness and being back on God's way or God's path.

### **"Don't Shoot the Messenger!"**

The job of a messenger, which is to deliver God's message, overlaps with the role of the prophet: to speak the truth in such a way that it draws people back to God.

Despite the overwhelming response of the people here—that people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him" (v. 5), we should also acknowledge that this was not an easy message to hear and not all people would have heard this as forgiveness or freedom or good news.

No doubt you have heard the saying, "**Don't shoot the messenger!**" It's a figure of speech which is an admonition to not blame the bearer of bad news. It is often used when someone reveals a difficult truth that the listener does not want to hear. It reminds the listener that the truth is not the fault of the person revealing the truth. When a messenger points to the truth, a truth that is hard to hear, and calls for repentance--for people to change their way or change their orientation or turn around, then that change is disruptive and is resisted by some.

"Don't shoot the messenger!" came into play later in John's life: You may recall that he literally lost his head.

John said that it wasn't right for Herod Antipas, the Roman ruler of Galilee, to have married his brother Philip's wife, who was called Herodias. Herod himself viewed

John cautiously because he thought he was a holy man, but Herodias, his wife, conspired to have John killed. (See Mark 6:17-28).

## Messages within our Culture speaking truth and calling us to turn around

- The job of a messenger is to deliver the message.
- The job of a prophet is to speak truth in order to draw people back to God's way.
- Or, to use the Advent theme word, **dreamers** are those who long for a better world and who are seeking to connect with God's vision of justice and peace.
- Where are those jobs or voices in our own time and culture?

And do we heed them or do we discredit them? Do we, figuratively and sometimes literally, "shoot the messenger" because the truth is too uncomfortable to bear?

## How Do You Determine Credibility? (Who is Credible?)

In our socio-political context, determining who a messenger is, who that person represents, and if that message is credible can be difficult. We don't literally "shoot the messenger," but we observe repeatedly that when some people don't like the message, the messenger's character is attacked or a claim of "Fake News!" is made to cast doubt on that person's credibility.

What are some messages that we have seen and heard in our culture this past year? Maybe we could think about what kind of world God intends and how we hear and receive messages and if we understand those messages to be reflective of the world that God intends. And if we find that those messages are hard to hear, then maybe we could reflect on whether our anger is truly about the messenger or if it's just that we don't want to acknowledge the truth of hearing a difficult message.

***Display pictures of protest signs from this past year***

- George Floyd
  - George Floyd did not deserve to die. His death is a reminder of the sin of racism.
- "I can't breathe"



These words were first associated with Eric Garner, who died in July 2014 when placed in a prohibited chokehold while being arrested. 11 times while lying face down on the sidewalk he said, “I can’t breathe.”<sup>2</sup>

- Justice Brings Peace
  - What’s the relationship of peace to justice?
- Love of Power: “When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace.”



- Dr. Keeperman from Renown at “Alternative Care Site”  
This is Dr. Jacob Keeperman, a physician from right here at Renown Medical Center.<sup>3</sup> He took this selfie picture of himself on November 12, right before the former parking garage, modified into an “Alternative Care Site” to treat COVID patients, was opened to receive patients forced there by overflowing numbers of patients.
  - Dr. Keeperman<sup>4</sup>: “We are getting close to a breaking point. Our health care heroes are tired. They want to do the best they can and they need everybody’s help.”
  - Photo was taken Nov. 12 before the facility opened to patients later in the day. (“Due to national HIPAA laws and human decency, I wouldn’t take pictures of a patient. We have since taken care of more than 200 patients in a parking garage—a place I never thought I would take care of a human being.”)
    - Others claimed the picture was reflective of COVID being a hoax. They claimed the still-wrapped beds and absence of patients in the photo proved that.



<sup>2</sup> See Wikipedia entry: Killing of Eric Garner. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing\\_of\\_Eric\\_Garner](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing_of_Eric_Garner)

<sup>3</sup> Beatrice Dupuy. “Nevada doctor’s selfie used to claim COVID-19 is a hoax.” December 1, 2020. AP News report: <https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-reno-doctor-selfie-6d26d70305a1599bf3ce82bf874a9934>

<sup>4</sup> Quotes taken from his interview with Erin Burnett on CNN.

<https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2020/12/03/nevada-dr-larry-keeperman-coronavirus-parking-garage-unit-trump-ebf-sot-vpx.cnn>

- Dr Keeperman: “[I am] holding the hand of patients as they take their last breath because their family can’t be with them. And then I have to call their loved ones after to tell them they won’t be coming home.”
- He pays tribute to all hospital workers and specifically names different types of employees, such as housekeeping, food services, transporters, therapists of all kinds, lab techs, etc.

## **Closing: Being among those who Dream**

Our theme for these four weeks of Advent is “**Those Who Dream.**” We have defined dreaming as longing for a better world and longing for the world which God intends or is bringing about. Today our focus has been on John’s role as messenger. What messages seeking to prepare the way of the Lord or making straight God’s path are being spoken in our time and culture and how are we responding to those messages?

May God grant us wisdom and courage to follow God’s way in the world.