

Mark 1:1-8

TURNING AROUND

One of our family traditions is that, the weekend following Thanksgiving Day, we put up our Christmas decorations. The outside lights are in place; the Christmas tree is up; there are angels hovering and nutcrackers standing guard in their usual locations. Last but certainly not least, there are a lot of different nativity scenes – on the mantel, the piano, the bookshelf, and various tables. We look at each manger and we remember when and where we purchased it or who gave it to us. We got the olive wood set in Jerusalem in 1992. Here's the beautiful one that our daughter-in-law Sarah gave to us. That lovely one came from a family in Richmond as a way of thanking me for officiating at their son's wedding. These unique manger scenes have come from dear friends, who have enjoyed adding to our collection. And so on.

These nativity scenes have a lot of things in common. In each one, you find Mary and Joseph hovering reverently over the holy child, Jesus. There are the humble shepherds and the gift-bearing wise men and, surrounding them, are assorted cattle, sheep, camels, and maybe a donkey. There is one other thing the manger displays have in common. There is one particular person missing from these holy tableaux.

Have you ever seen John the Baptist in any of the nativities? He would be the hairy, unkempt, wild-looking guy wearing camel's hair clothing. There might be a piece of locust stuck between his teeth and honey drippings in his shaggy beard. And his mouth would be wide open, caught in mid-sentence, as he proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Yes, John is missing from the various manger settings.

On this second Sunday of Advent, we encounter this strange, lonely figure out in the wilderness calling God's people to "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

When I think of John the Baptist, three things come to mind. According to Luke's gospel, John was **family**; he was related to Jesus on their mothers' side. When Mary was with child, she went to visit her older relative Elizabeth, who had also conceived. When Mary entered Zechariah's house and greeted them, the child John leaped for joy in Elizabeth's womb.

Besides being family, John was the **forerunner**. John's role was to prepare the way for the coming of the Christ. The Jews of Jesus' day expected Elijah to come before the Messiah. In Matthew's gospel (17:10), Jesus told his disciples that Elijah had already come in the person of John the Baptist. John came first to get people ready for Jesus' arrival on the scene.

Along with being family and the forerunner to Jesus, John was also his **friend**. John knew his place, and he gave Jesus the encouragement to step up and fulfill his God-given mission. In John's gospel, we find John the Baptist telling those around him: "I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him... I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'... The one who is coming after me, I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal... He must increase, but I must decrease" (1:23, 27; 3:28, 30).

As the saying goes, any friend of Jesus is a friend of ours. So, while we don't show John the Baptist in any of our manger settings, he does come on the scene this second Sunday of Advent to greet us and to exhort us to straighten up and get right with God. As with our closest friends, John the Baptist tells us what we don't want to hear but what we need to hear in order to get our lives back on track and headed in the right direction.

At first, John's message comes across as bad news. He told those, who came out to the wilderness to hear him, to be baptized in the Jordan River; they were dirty on the inside due to their sinfulness, and they needed to be washed clean. His message hasn't changed across the centuries. He still "calls a spade a spade." He doesn't mince any words in telling us that there

are things in our lives that need to be changed. We are sinners - whether we like it or not, whether we admit it or not – persons who have fallen short of God’s intentions for our lives. And, in the process, we have fallen away from God. We have distorted the divine image in which we were created, and we have distanced ourselves from the very One, who made us, loves us the most, and yearns to be in relationship with us all.

Here’s some more bad news: we can’t fix or resolve the problem on our own. All we can do is turn around, turn back to God, and God will do the rest. That’s why John calls for repentance, which means a complete turning around. We are called to turn away from a preoccupation with self, from the sins we commit and the good that we fail to do, and to turn our attention and devotion back to God. We can’t prepare the way for the Lord unless and until we repent by turning around and living in accordance with God’s will and ways.

When we repent, then and only then, the bad news becomes good news; the baptism of repentance leads to the forgiveness of sins. By the power of the Holy Spirit working within us, change can happen. We are not stuck in our sins. Mark tells us up front – “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” – and he goes on to tell us how Jesus died for the sins of the world in order to save us – and he will, he does!

Isn’t that how it works in the world? We might have to face the bad news first before it can become good news. You go for a physical and the tests come back; the doctor tells you your cholesterol is too high and your weight gain is too much. But the bad news is just what you needed to motivate you to change and begin taking steps toward the good news of a healthier lifestyle. A spouse comes and shares feelings of dissatisfaction in the relationship. What sounds like bad news provides the opportunity for good news, for healing and better communication in the marriage. A child has not been himself lately. After repeated attempts of asking what’s

wrong and being ignored, the truth finally comes out – he’s on drugs. By confronting and addressing the bad news, the good news of recovery can begin. Another friend loses her job; without warning, the company just laid her off. And yet, before too long, the good news begins to surface. She despised her job because it sucked the life out of her and demanded too much of her time. She now feels free and energized to start over and refocus on a new path.

Quite often, bad news can give way to good news. The table set before us with the bread soon to be broken and the cup poured out remind us vividly of the awful sins of humankind, which led to the gruesome suffering and agonizing death of Jesus, the Son of God, on the cross. And yet, three days later, that bad news gave way to good news; our death penalty was transformed by God into the way, the truth, and the life - new, abundant, and eternal life. The broken bread has become for us all the bread of life; the cup is now the cup of our salvation.

So, I’m glad John the Baptist has shown up once again during Advent, and, I am grateful that the bad news of our sinfulness leads to the good news of our forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

On this “Bring A Friend Sunday” in the life of our church, let me close with the story of a legendary group of friends, known as the Inklings, that included C. S. Lewis, his brother Warnie, J. R. R. Tolkein, Charles Williams, and a few others. Their friendship sustained them through wars, lost loves, deaths, and several career moves and writing projects, including the creation of Middle Earth and Narnia. When Charles Williams died suddenly on May 15, 1945, Warnie Lewis spoke of the stunned shock of his death, how much the Inklings would miss their friend and how they would miss their arguments. They would miss him, Warnie said, but mostly they would miss who they had been when he was present. (Michael Jenkins’ article, *What Sustains Us*, in his Thinking Out Loud email from Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, 4/26/11)

Imagine what we would have missed out on if John had never appeared out there in the wilderness or in here, in the wilderness of our souls. Thank God that our good friend, John the Baptist, has once again stepped into our midst and has reminded us to prepare the way of the Lord by changing and repenting of our sins. As we do so, the bad news is washed away by the good news; for when we turn around, we gaze into the loving, forgiving face of Jesus, our Lord and our Savior, and we are made clean inside and out. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Randall C. Stevens
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA
December 4, 2011