

“Wilderness Way”

Isaiah 40:1-11 Mark 1:1-8

Advent often brings us face to face with John the Baptist in our Scripture readings. What a strange character he is and what a strange message he has for us. I challenge you to find John on any Christmas card, or in a manger scene, or as anything more than an after thought in our Christmas story memories. Yet the writer of the Mark begins his story with John the Baptist front and center. He is placed in the tradition of the prophet Isaiah, **“Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare the way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, ...”** For the writer of Mark, the path to Jesus Christ leads straight through John the Baptist and his wilderness call to repent of our sins and be baptized. The wilderness path of repentance of sins and baptism by water will lead, we are told, to an encounter with Christ who will baptize us with the Holy Spirit. Advent waiting leads us through the wilderness in the hope of Christ baptizing us anew with the Holy Spirit this Christmas, the year of our Lord 2005.

This wilderness way, to prepare the way of the Lord, is perhaps getting harder and harder to find. There are few maps, only ancient words of Scripture and the testimony of blessed saints and sinners throughout the ages. United Methodist Bishop William Willimon says of this, **“We are bathed in a forest of lights, sales, parties, and Christmas cards. In this bubble bath of Christmas schmooz, John is nowhere to be found. We won’t find John rushing about in the city center. Oh, plenty of Christmas characters will make their home there, through no choosing of their own. Angels, wise men, shepherds, and little drummer boys are**

easily found where the action is. Such characters are rather friendly and marketable. They connote a Jesus whose cousins might have been well-to-do temple elites, merchants, or even Jerusalem politicians, rather than a hairy fire and brimstone preacher, whose breath reeks of locusts and honey. The primary product John uses to deliver his wilderness good news – repentance – doesn't sell well in the days before Christmas, not at the local shopping mall, and not in First Church Main Street.” Lord have mercy on us all!

Sin comes in two basic forms. There is such a thing as systematic, corporate, community sin. The United Church of Christ and other old time, mainline churches are often quite vigorous in seeking to root these out and call us to much needed community repentance. Such sins are at the root of peace and justice issues.

We all saw some of the effects of community sin on display in the recent Hurricane Katrina disaster. Primarily it was the poor, the aged, the sick, the infirm, and the widows who suffered the most. The recent Habitat for Humanity newsletter highlighted some scandalous information on New Orleans prior to the hurricane. This information comes from the Drum Major Institute for Public Policy. 20.8% of the population lived below the poverty line in 2003. This placed them 17th in the nation among cities with the worst rate of poverty. One third of all African Americans did NOT have access to a car in the year 2000. 25% of evacuees in Houston shelters had NOT heard about the evacuation order before the hurricane hit! 38% of evacuees in Houston say they will never recover from the effects of the hurricane.

Might Deutero-Isaiah say, **“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to New Orleans and cry to her that her warfare is**

ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord...."

Community of Faith United Church of Christ in Houston has helped resettle 37 people from New Orleans. Many of them are now attending this church. The national UCC special offering for the Katrina disaster provided \$110,000 to help with this project! Something we can all be proud of, especially if you contributed to this fund. A number of people, including one extended family, came to the last night of last week's South Central Conference Spiritual Retreat for clergy to share their testimony and witness to their faith. It was the highlight of the retreat for all of us!

Surprisingly, a number of them shared how the hurricane was a BLESSING for them. They quite rightly pointed out that different people experienced the hurricane and its aftermath differently, but for them it was a blessing! How could this be? It didn't look like a blessing on TV and indeed for many, many people it was most certainly NOT a blessing. Like most, they had lost nearly everything they had. What would make these people see it as a blessing?

One young woman spoke of how in her neighborhood people were getting shot and killed every week. In fact one week before Katrina arrived her best friend had been killed. She said you couldn't walk in safety down the street day or night! She said she was "Happy that Katrina came We were doing things we shouldn't have been doing. I had to get out."

"Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; and the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places made plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

I mentioned that there is both corporate, or community sin and individual sin. The young lady I was just speaking of spoke of how both deeply affected her.

A young man highlighted his personal sin. He said that as clergy we all knew the 10 commandments. He said he broke ELEVEN of them every day! He said he was baptized two weeks before Katrina. “The hurricane came to get me out of New Orleans where I was working with the devil. It helped me jump start my life in a new way!”

“All flesh is grass, ... the grass withers, and the flower fades; when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; sure the people is grass. The grass withers and the flower fades; but the word of God will stand forever.”

Coming out of the disaster that was pre-Katrina and the disaster that post Katrina, these people were filled with praise for God and thanksgiving for their deliverance, their deliverance from both personal and corporate sin. They clearly felt that God was moving in their lives and in their midst. They had found a wonderful community of faith that welcomed them, that could nourish them in their spiritual journey. Their main spokesperson said, **“You haven’t seen anything. TV can’t show it all. Many didn’t have beds before Katrina let alone afterwards! We can’t repay you. All we can do is love you!”**

As a closing thank you to us and praise to God for all God’s blessings, one of the young men with them, a gospel singer named Jai Reed, sang a song with all the joy and energy faith in God can bring. I wrote the words down, but I wish he was here to sing it for you.

There’s a greater blessing when you are obedient to God.

We give glory to you O God.

How can I say thanks for the things you’ve done for me.

Things so undeserved, that you gave your love for me.

The voices of a million angels can not express my gratitude.

All that I am or ever hope to be...

I owe it all to thee.

To God be the glory (x3)

For the things he hath done, to God be the Glory....

Just let me live my life

Let it be pleasing Lord unto thee.

With his blood he hath saved me.

With his power he has raised me.

To God be the glory!

He concluded, saying, **“All I want is to be right when God comes!”**

What can one say to this? Perhaps the words of Isaiah are apt, **Behold the Lord God comes with might, behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom,”**

Amen.