

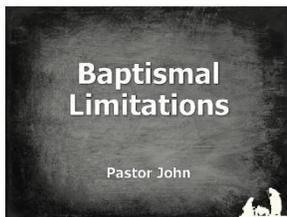
"Baptismal Limitations"

December 10, 2017

Scripture: Mark 1: 1-8

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

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ 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. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."



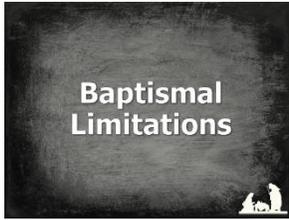
Welcome to week two of Advent! Our focus today will be on John the Baptist and his role in the Advent story. Last week we began to look at the unfolding story of Advent as an event

that calls us to stay tuned, to be ready for whatever comes next, to wait with impatience. In our Advent study, "Down to Earth", the first week focused with a down to earth love. The core question for week one of our Advent study was this: "What difference does our faith make in our lives"?



Last Sunday I closed the message with a series of questions. I asked what our lives would look like if we lived alert. Today, a couple of follow-up questions: Did you live an alert life this past week, noticing the presence of God in your life, answering the call of Jesus to live out your faith, on the lookout for the places that the Holy Spirit was leading you to share God's love, abundance, and justice? Did you stay tuned, alert, and ready for the inbreaking of Jesus into your day to day life?

The first "Down to Earth" daily devotional reading for week one really hit the nail on the head for me as I pondered this central question. Perhaps you already saw this on our church Facebook page, but I think it is worth sharing and considering again today. The first entry in our Advent devotional was written by a young lady named Rachel who worked for a time for the Department of Transportation for a time as she studied her way through seminary. On her last day working for the DOT, she was assigned trash duty with another DOT employee. They got along well and she enjoyed spending time with this young man, so Rachel was looking forward to the day. As they were driving along a country road picking up trash, they came to a familiar spot. She exclaimed, "There is my church!" Her co-worker, slightly stunned by the comment, asked what she meant. She told him that this was the church she pastored on Sundays while attending seminary. His response was, "Pastor? I didn't even know you were a Christian." It made her really reflect on this question: How did her faith make a difference in her life? If you were to drive by the church with a friend, a classmate, or a co-worker and you said, "There's my church!" would they have the same response as Rachel's co-worker had for her? I hope not. Let us pray.

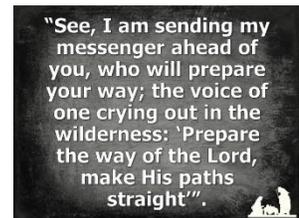


In our scripture passage for today we begin with a man whose faith certainly made a difference in his life and in the life of many others. Today we meet the first of our characters in the unfolding story of Advent. Today we meet John the Baptist.

As we begin Mark's Gospel, John is already out in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But John has some background to his story too. Mark begins today, reminding his readers and us here today that John has been anticipated and expected for a long time now.

Verse two in Mark's Gospel reminds us of John's Old Testament connection,

saying, *"As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'"*.

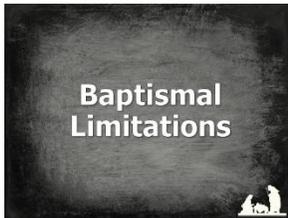


This quote from Isaiah 40 that Mark references continues, connecting this voice to the One who will come soon to the same One who will come again. Again, it is all part of the bigger picture of God's plan for saving the world that I spoke of last week. John the Baptist is just one of many characters who have a role to play in this unfolding story. In Isaiah 40, we again hear of the end of the movie that we began with last week in Mark 13. Isaiah 40, verses four and five read,

"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. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." All things will be made new. All will be redeemed. The



culmination of this Advent story comes not with the birth of baby Jesus but with the second coming and Christ's final victory over sin and evil and death.

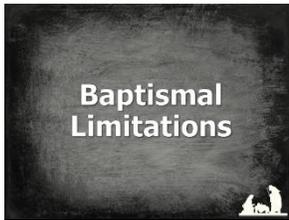


In our passage from Mark 1, we find John the Baptist already hard at work baptizing people. John is living out in the wilderness, preaching and calling people to repent of their sins so that they are prepared for the coming of the Messiah. The people flock out to see John. He is joyous yet also challenging in his work. There are the moments where people come to see John the Baptist because they have a sincere desire to change their lives and to draw close to God. As John receives these folks' confessions, I imagine he looks like the man in this picture: joyful that another child of God has chosen to get back on the narrow path and to give their life to God.



There are other moments though, when the religious leaders come out to see just what is happening in the wilderness. John challenges them, calling them things such as "a brood of vipers" as he condemns the unrepented sin in their lives. In both cases, with those seeking to repent and with those who do not know they need to repent, John is simply preparing the way for the coming of the Lord. He knows that, like the doorkeeper from last week's parable, that his job is singular. John clearly understands that his work is limited. We can see from Mark's reports of people coming "*from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem*" that John was making a difference, that he was

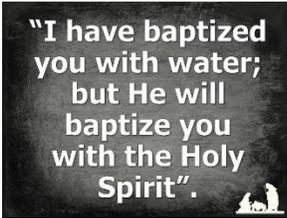
changing hearts and lives. John was doing what God has sent him out into the wilderness to do and he was helping people to prepare for the coming Messiah.



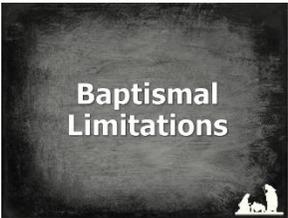
As we think about who and what John was, we can begin to see ourselves as people who can also play a role in God's unfolding story. Our scripture today tells us that *"John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey"*. He did not wear a fancy suit or even a tie. He did not dine only at the finest establishments out there in the desert. John was a pretty basic guy, living a really simple lifestyle. John did not attend rabbi school as a young man. He was not specially trained to do the work of God. But John did not see any of these things as limitations. He recognized the call that God had on his life and he went out and faithfully served God. John's one call was to help people prepare for the one who was coming. His task was to prepare people to hear and accept the good news of Jesus Christ. In our lives, we too play the same role. We are all called to minister to the world, to share the good news of Jesus Christ so that He can go to work in their lives. We, like John, are called to help prepare the way for the Lord. And, like John, do we have limitations that we must face? Yes, we do.

The baptism that John offered was a limited baptism. John's call to people to repent of their sins and to be baptized was a symbolic baptism. In the waters of John's baptism, people were symbolically washing away their sins and being made spiritually clean. This was the first step in preparing the way for the work

of Jesus that would come next. In repenting of their sins and becoming symbolically clean, the people were straightening out their lives and preparing themselves to receive the baptism that Jesus would offer. John himself acknowledges his own baptismal limitations, saying, *"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. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."* John is raising Jesus up while recognizing the limits that he himself has. John recognizes that his baptism prepares people for the baptism of the Holy Spirit that Jesus will soon offer.



"I have baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit".



Baptismal Limitations

At one point or another in our spiritual journeys, most of us have come to the waters of baptism. For many in the Methodist church, it is during infancy or early childhood that one is baptized. For others, it is later in life, perhaps in adolescence or even in adulthood for some, that one is baptized. In our church, whenever a baptism takes place, we begin a baptism with these words: *"Through the sacrament of baptism we are initiated into Christ's holy Church. We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God's gift, offered to us without price"*. It is through baptism, at whatever age it occurs, that we are initiated or marked as a child of God. In baptism, we become a part of Christ's holy church and our lives are opened to the free and undeserved gift of salvation. This is a gift that we each will hopefully claim one day. In baptism, we are reminded that we are truly loved, that we are forgiven, and that we are accepted by God without any reason for deserving it and without

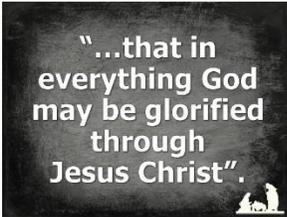
any requirement to earn it. All this is true regardless of whether it is a person choosing to be baptized themselves or if it is a parent or parents who are choosing to have their child baptized. This is true because in a baptism, it is not I or any other pastor or priest that does the "work". In a baptism, it is the Holy Spirit alone that works to change a person's heart.

For all believers, baptism is an active preparation for receiving the good news of Jesus Christ. Through baptism, our hearts are changed. Today, in just a moment, as you come forward to remember your baptism, be reminded of these words that we as the congregation say as a covenant pledge: *"As members together with you in the body of Christ and in this congregation of The United Methodist Church, we renew our covenant faithfully to participate in the ministries of the Church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness"*. This is the covenant we enter into – reminding ourselves of this commitment each time we baptize one into the church. It is our pledge to faithfully serve God in all we do.

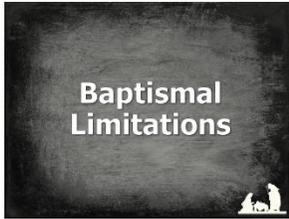


"We renew our covenant faithfully to participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness".

The covenant finishes with these words: *"that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ"*. As we renew this covenant today through the remembrance of our baptism, we offer our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and our witness so that in everything God may be glorified. Through this covenant, we join John the Baptist in preparing the way for Jesus Christ to engage the world in a heart-changing way.



"...that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ".



We are reminded that just as John went forth and answered God's call upon his life as he ministered out in the wilderness, we too are capable and worthy of answering the call that God places upon each of our lives. As we go out into the world during this Advent season, may we be like John, seeking to prepare the way for others to know Christ. As we go out today, may we simply play our role, recognizing that it is the power of Holy Spirit that does the work to change hearts and minds, just as it does in baptism. May we each be willing and humble servants of the Lord as we seek to share the light and love of Christ with a world in need. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) How have you been more alert to or tuned in to God's presence and call so far this Advent season? How could this continue to grow?
- 2) Our baptism 'reminds us that we join John the Baptist in preparing to engage the world in a heart-changing way'. Pray for this in your life!
- 3) Who can you serve this week that would help them to come to know the light and love of Christ in their lives? What steps must you take?