

***The Call of the Wild***  
**Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8**  
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Laura Smith Conrad, Associate Pastor  
Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church

Mark's gospel today slams on the brakes and stops short. It begins abruptly with no mystery, no intrigue, no subtle message. There are no angels whispering in Mary's ear, "Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you." Nor, do we have a star in the distance calling shepherds to follow. Mark's gospel has no birth story, no stable, or manger bed. Mark gets to the point. As verse 1 states, "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The beginning is not a baby in a manger to Mark. The beginning is the gospel or good news of Jesus the Messiah- the one that they have been waiting for all these years. The 1<sup>st</sup> verse serves as a title that tells the whole point of the book.

The Scripture focuses us immediately onto John, Jesus' cousin. In the wild we encounter this old-fashioned prophet, like the old guys who used to call the people to get right with God, to live a faithful life, to turn again to God. *John the Baptist*, as most refer to him, was really *John the Jew*; although he did inspire a large denomination of believers who are apt to dunk rather than sprinkle when it comes to baptism, [but] John did not invent baptism. The priests of the day had always had washing rituals to cleanse and offer a fresh start. But the priests did not do it with the drama and flair of our friend John. John was a believer in what educators call the Experiential Learner. People who were dusty from their travels and thirsting for refreshment, needed to experience refreshment, not just hear about it. People who were drawn to the wilderness and this strange character were searching for something real, something more. That is what John was offering.

Imagine the scene with me. A lean man in animal skins is knee-deep in the river Jordan and yelling at the crowds who keep gathering.

I don't know about you but I usually try to avoid folks like that. Recently while in a large city, I encountered a street preacher on the crowded sidewalk. He was yelling "Repent or accept Hell" and it was as if we all knew the protocol....look straight ahead...avoid eye contact....and pass right by him as quickly as possible. John was in the tradition of the prophets of old and his disciples keep showing up throughout history....a voice crying in the wilderness of the city scene or in the tent revival that takes up an empty lot once a year on Cherry Rd. John keeps yelling his message, and most of us look straight ahead, avoid eye contact, and keep moving.

But something strange was happening in that camp site by the Jordan, people were coming way out there to see John. Street preachers plant themselves in your way. John located himself in an out of the way wilderness place. People were compelled to come out into the wild and hear what this sweating, yelling,

spitting prophet was dishing out. Here was John standing knee-deep in the Jordan River in the tradition of Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos and Isaiah, the prophets of old. He was standing in the river that his Jewish ancestors had passed through- a river through which God made a way when it looks as though there was no way out, no way through. Passage through that river took them into the Promised Land. In some strange way folks were connecting again with the crying out prophet and maybe reconnecting with those who in the faith had come before them. You see the Temple and the institution of religious life was nice and all, but something keeps drawing them out in the wild. Something calls them to the river. Something makes them long to be made new. It seems that faith is born in the wild where the Holy Spirit can blow freely.

Have you ever thought about that? Faith is usually born in the wild. Faith is usually born in a place that provides a challenge, a new perspective, and makes one appreciate blessings like hot showers and warm meals. In the wild you breathe deeply of the clean air. You look at your surroundings in a new way. You think of the essentials: food, rest, survival, and the sweet communion of companions on the journey.

Here was John offering a full immersion baptism. No priests or Session had approved it. He was offering it to all who hungered and thirsted for a new way- going as far as to offer baptism to women who were not even allowed into the most important places of the Temple. John was yelling, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." According to the prophet Isaiah, the messenger is preparing the way for SOMEONE greater than he. He would prepare the way for the ONE promised by God who would bring peace, forgiveness, and wholeness.

Here's the deal- you have to want good news to go out that far to hear it. You have to really need to see a new way out of no way to be compelled to leave your comforts behind, to journey past the road way robbers, to venture out into the wild. Yet the thing that compelled them was that people were ready to be made new...ready to believe in love, hope, peace, freedom again. Maybe the wounds of relationships had robbed them of their faith in others. Maybe having everything you wanted, but no real purpose had gotten old. Maybe being poor, disenfranchised, the powerless had gotten too much to take. They were ready to be made new...to believe again in love, hope, peace, and freedom.

Perhaps you are ready to believe again and to be made new. Maybe you are ready for that mountain you have been climbing to be made low and to walk easier. Maybe you are ready for the rough places of your life to be made smooth. Maybe you are ready to be one that prepares the way so that fellow travelers looking to be made new can believe again.

I guess John could not keep quiet because he knew that people needed to know that God was on the way. Like the angel said to Mary, "Greetings favored one.

The Lord is with you.” People were hungry to know God was with them, and then he came. He was born in a feedbox in a barn on the outskirts of town. He was born into a world marked by greed and hunger for power over peace. He was born into a world where people fought over resources and status. He was born in a town called Bethlehem or *house of bread* as it means in Hebrew, and he would become the bread for the world.

Isaiah 40:11 states,

“He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather his lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”

Jesus came to make things right. He is the SOMEONE about whom John cried out, because he knew it was a message they needed to hear.

But it was so much more than a message, it was an act. John invited people to be made new by washing in the river...repenting of the ways that had burdened them down. John was asking them to repent, to change- not change that is as easy as simply rearranging the furniture or getting a new haircut.

John called them to repent, to change, to be set them free from the things that had captured them- things like:

- the lie that we have to trust only ourselves or only others for our well-being, not God
- the untruth that faith is about believing the right way not a life lived in trust and obedience
- the belief that because of the past, there is no hope for us for the future.

John also knew that people needed to be released from the things that not only captured them, but captivated them...

- an addiction to substance, control or the internet
- a single-minded concern for self without regard to others
- a concern for our own but not them

As Mark says in the first verse this is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God...we begin by preparing a way for the Lord. Preparing is so much bigger than preparing your house for the Christmas season.

As the ancient Christian Tertullian reminds us that we prepare the home of our heart:

"John called us to purge our minds of whatever impurity error had imparted, whatever contamination ignorance had engendered, which repentance would sweep and scour away, and cast out. *So prepare the home of your heart by making it clean for the Holy Spirit.*"<sup>1</sup>

So as we prepare this Advent season to receive the One who is coming to shepherd and to feed his sheep, we prepare the homes of our hearts by making it clean for the Holy Spirit. We listen to the call because we want something new to spring up in the wild places of our hearts- to begin again, to believe again.

So the question is will you go out into the wild? Will you seek to find Jesus the Christ in an unusual place- maybe a place you've never been before?

Or

Will you and I stay in the warm comfort of our familiar to be coddled and over-fed?

John cries out and calling us to pay attention, to prepare for his coming.

The Good Shepherd knew that we would need nourishment for this journey to Bethlehem. He knew that so well because

he also went to the wilderness and faced temptations,  
he was washed in the waters of baptism,  
he faced his enemies and suffered rejection,  
he was disappointed by his closest friends,  
he knew the loneliness and pain of a cross,  
he also knew the joy of reunion,  
the peace of reconciliation,  
and the hope of new life  
which he came to offer to us.

The baby born in a feed-box, grows up to shepherd his people and feeds us at his table. Are you ready to feed on the bread of life and to drink deeply of the cup of salvation?

Let us pray:

**You, Lord, are our Shepherd. In our waiting for you to be born anew in our lives, send your Holy Spirit to call us again to repent, change, prepare, while we actively wait for you. Keep us from every distraction that takes our eye off of you this season of preparation. Feed us with good things and bring us into your fold, even as we seek to turn around and follow the straight path that leads us to you. In the name of the Expected One, we pray, AMEN.**

1. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament II*, Manlio Simonetti, ed; Thomas Oden, General Series Editor. (Downer's Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2002), xxi.