

December 10, 2017 2nd Sunday of Advent
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Mark 1:1-8

John the Baptist at the Holiday Party

John the Baptist appears, an odd figure this season. The weather outside is frightful, but John doesn't wear a holiday sweater, John is clothed in camel's hair. There are treats aplenty at parties and receptions, school and work gatherings, but John doesn't eat Christmas cookies, or drink eggnog, or drink too much, John gets by on wild honey and, even wilder, locusts, bugs. We hear bouncy holiday songs being played in grocery stores and drug stores and coffee shops and on the radio, but John doesn't croon about chestnuts roasting on open fire. John cries out, "Repent."

It's odd, perhaps, to place this Advent prophet amidst contemporary cultural markers of the season. It's odd, perhaps, to situate John the Baptist into our present context. If we were to situate John biblically, we would note that he was a contemporary of Jesus. Jesus and John the Baptist were related, cousins on their mother's side, and just about the same age, in utero at the same time. Another gospel tells us that at one point during the dual pregnancies the mothers got together, and when John's mother, Elizabeth, saw the mother of Jesus, Elizabeth felt the babe in her womb leap for joy. Mothers may recognize that feeling, when the new life growing inside you moves, that odd and wondrous, and sometimes painful feeling. I wonder if John's jump had a jab to it. I think it must have, when you consider the man he became, how pointed he could be with what he said. John pointedly named the excesses, the wrongnesses, of what was going on around him. It was sharp, what John said, sharp and compelling. Crowds came to listen to him, this odd figure, crying out in the wilderness. They came to hear John at a time when the news all around them was not good, when the latest from the empire, in the Judean Daily, on their digital alerts, when all the news they heard was one bad thing after another.

They came because they knew John had his finger on something: John had his finger on what they saw all around them, and what it did to them: the sadness that had seeped into their souls, the sadness of it, and the sludge, how they longed for something that could wash it away. And so they came to listen to John, and came to call him the Baptist, because of that thing he did. They came to see and listen to him and he dunked them into Jordan river, chilly and cold, as the old spiritual tells us. How bracing it must have been to be submerged into those outdoor waters and then emerge, the air fresh and prickling on drenched skin. But even as John did it, even as he baptized, John preached: brace yourself for something more, "I baptize you with water, but there is one coming after me..."

I imagine that that is what John is saying in the sketch on the cover of today's bulletin. The bulletin artwork this Sunday is a loose line drawing of John the Baptist, raising his hand, making his point, "There is one coming after me..." There's a famous painting that also depicts John pointing, but in a different way. This painting is actually a multi panel altarpiece, a piece of religious art from the Late Renaissance by Matthias Grunewald, they say it is his masterpiece. Grunewald made the altarpiece for a monastery near Isenheim that specialized in hospital work; the monks there cared especially for sufferers of the plague. Grunewald's painting has precise lines and vivid colors and deep shadows, life-like representations of its figures, the folds of clothing and textures of skin. John the Baptist is featured in the central panel of the altarpiece, he's a bit off to the side, there in his camel hair cloak—such an odd item of clothing. Even more odd is John's pose. As I noted, he is pointing, his long, thin, finger set against a dark background draws the eye. But in this picture, John's finger is not pointing up. In the Isenheim altarpiece

John the Baptist points his finger horizontally to a figure at the very center of the altarpiece, which is Christ, on the cross, his naked body covered with the same sort of sores as those who suffer from the plague.

How affecting it must have been for those who were sick to see their bodies on Christ's body, to see Christ wearing a body like theirs. How affecting for the monks, to see their ministry to the sick and suffering as ministry to Christ.

The great twentieth century Swiss theologian Karl Barth, who was writer of a multivolume and multilayered systematics and who was also an early resistor to Hitler, Barth was fascinated by this painting. Barth had a print of it hanging in his study and wrote on various occasions that in its figures, in one gesture, one finger, it summed up theology, what prophecy and ministry is and does: points to Christ, the one who shares our sorrows, points to Christ on the cross, as John the Baptist did.

Which is also odd, because, biblically, John the Baptist wasn't at the crucifixion. John himself had been killed, violently, not long before Jesus was. They were related in that way, too, both thrown into prison and then brutally executed. It's as odd to put John the Baptist at the foot of the cross as it is to put him in the drug store or grocery store or office party. It's as odd to do that, and all the more necessary, and all the more affecting. We need to see and hear John, here among us, because we need to hear the good news that John announces: that God comes to meet us in our sadness, in our sickness, in all that comes with having human skin. John the Baptist won't let us miss the point of this season: the advent of our God. John won't let us miss the point, pointing, as he always does, to Christ. John did it from his mother's womb; and he did so as an adult on the banks of the Jordan, John even managed to do so when he was dead.

I have known people like John the Baptist, people who pointed me to Christ. My piano teacher was one, she just died last month. I took lessons with her all through middle school, and high school. She was a church organist and school teacher who nurtured in me a love of music, and she was simply a loving person, she who pointed to Christ by the way she taught scores of kindergartners and scores of music, she pointed to Christ by the art she shared, by the way she praised God when she played. A Lutheran pastor I met in my early twenties was another. I met him when I was in my twenties, living in New York City—this was years before I became a pastor myself, I had thought about it but with ambivalence, I wasn't sure I fit the mold, I was raised in a branch of the Lutheran church that doesn't ordain women. This pastor had been raised in that same branch of Lutheranism, which also doesn't ordain people who are gay, which he was. He showed me how you could be yourself, you could wear the skin God gave you, and be a pastor. Since we met almost twenty years ago he's gotten married and in time he and his husband adopted a child—a child who was older and who had had a very difficult early life. It can be hard to find homes for children in these circumstances. This pastor and his husband said, "We will be loving parents for that child." I'm going to see that pastor just this afternoon, he's just been called to serve a Lutheran church in the far suburbs, where I know he'll continue to point to Christ.

I hope that you, too, have known people who point to Christ: your parents, or people who became your parents; your co-workers, or coaches, or teachers. I hope you have known people who have shown you how beloved you are, who have shown you deepest empathy and sacrificial love, which is what God shows us, in Christ, who is God's masterpiece.

Let this be our art, to point to that. Let this be our art this season and always.