

Jan. 10, 2009

A Good Man...

Gen.1.1-5

Mark 1.4-11

Jesus is related to John—remember the story of John’s miraculous birth and the kinship between Mary and Elizabeth. John’s father Zachariah is a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem. To be a priest is to be near the top of socio-economic world of first century Judaism. Something happens to John before he follows in his father’s footsteps. John flips out—he became a rebel and an outcast. He goes into the wilderness, near the Jordan River. He lives there a life that makes him look like the Prophet Elijah. The book of Malachi said that a prophet who embodies the spirit of Elijah would come and prepare the way for the Messiah. Perhaps too, John was an Essene. The Essenes believed that the world was about to come to an end. They believed in ritual purification and sacred meals and a soon to be final battle between good and evil for control of the world. The son of Righteousness was to lead God’s angel armies. John looks a lot like an Essene.

But baptism for John was not apparently a ritual that needed repeating. Baptism required repentance, a turning again to God and therefore an embracing of God’s coming Kingdom and a renunciation of sin.

John calls people out of the city, away from the Temple. Getting right with God requires a sense of urgency about one’s soul. Even now the ax is put to the root of the tree. Bad wood—into the fire. But he is saying too that salvation is not to be found in the Temple sacrificial system. He attacks the Temple and condemns its corruption. He condemns Herod, the tyrannical king for killing his brother and marrying his brother’s wife. These attacks lead to his imprisonment and death.

Let’s try to deepen our understanding of John, the baptizer. There is a story about a poor teacher in ancient Greece who was visited one day by a prosperous friend, who was also a teacher. The prosperous friend said, You know Rufino, you wouldn’t have to only eat rice and beans, if you just learned to flatter the king. Rufino replied, if, my friend, you learned to only eat rice and beans, you wouldn’t have to flatter the king.

Actually, John developed a taste for honey covered locusts. He liked them extra crunchy.

John though embraced more than poverty. He discovered and proclaimed God in the wilderness. Gail and I wandered through the national parks one year. Arches, Canyonlands, Bryce, the Grand Canyon, and Yosemite. Our souls filled with the immensity, wonder and beauty of it all. Then on returning to NJ, I went to a meeting in NYC. Walking the streets I thought about how almost everything I could see was crafted by human beings, as opposed to those vistas where almost everything was crafted by nature and the God of nature. John is a wilderness guy. God, grace, hope and yes repentance in the context of the end of time—all that is to be found in the wilderness.

So John commends to us a kind of living in the wilderness vulnerability that generates a deepening dependence on the mystery and majesty of God. Someone said, Electricity is wonderful, but we have lost night.

John is an apocalyptic guy. The end is near. While we mostly just shake our heads in disbelief at those we talk about the endtime, we know that our lives are not endless. John wants us to contemplate our deaths so we repent and live our lives fully and gloriously now. He would have liked Flannery O'Connor.

In her story a Good Man is Hard to Find, she describes an unpleasant family who travel from Georgia to Florida. The grandmother is particularly self serving and deceitful. She hides her cat in a basket and the cat causes an accident. Trapped on the side of the road, the family is accosted by the Misfit, an escaped convict. Facing death, the grandmother's heart is converted—she finds honesty and compassion—she yearns to live and to love. The misfit shoots her and then says, she would have been a good woman if somebody had been there to shoot her every minute of her life.

I think that for us going out to meet John would be a little like someone threatening to shoot us, or to end our life all the time and thus putting pressure on us to repent now.

So, this is Jesus cousin. This is the John who baptizes Jesus into the movement. Initially, it even sounds like Jesus is picking up John's mantle after John is imprisoned. Mark tells us that after John was imprisoned, Jesus started preaching. Was John's arrest the signal or just the cause.

The Genesis text reminds us that the spirit of God was moving over the face of the watery chaos and out of that dance creation happened. So in baptism, Jesus would go down into the waters of chaos and then come up to be blessed by the spirit. The dove descending reminds us of the dove Noah sent out who returns with an olive branch. Now as the voice descend and the spirit comes upon Jesus a radical and glorious new word is heard. You are my beloved son with you I am well pleased. So John's preparation has created an environment into which Jesus can not only be baptized, but in the mystery of god can experience the spirit descending on him and received the words of eternal blessing—Beloved son.

In Acts, Paul makes it clear that there exists a radical difference between the baptism of John, the baptism of repentance and the baptism that is offered through the power of Christ by the Holy Spirit. I baptize you with water, says John—he will baptize you with Holy Spirit and with fire. So this is our story.

My great grandfather was a farmer, banker and blacksmith. Blacksmithing has always fascinated me. We are like the metal, fired, burnt by the Holy Spirit. Life, God, nature, love, death all shape us, pounding us, hopefully pounding the impurities out of us. Then water. Annealing is the name of that process. Baptism by water and spirit and fire is the description of our life journey.

It is no longer I who live but Christ Jesus who lives in me. So we too then come up out of the waters of chaos and are blessed by the spirit who says in our hearts—Beloved son. Beloved daughter.