

December 8, 2019

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Reading: Mark 1.1-8

The Message: A Message of Joy

It may not sound like it to you, but John's message was one of hope and joy. Far too many people think of John as a harsh figure, a prophet of doom and gloom, demanding painful repentance and warning of dire consequences if they failed to repent.

It is true that John was a tough, fiery character. It is true that his warnings were stern.

Matthew 3.7:

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he gave them what for.

Some of you will remember Neil Young as a former minister of Erindale united. At this time of year, I remember him for his Christmas card. On the front, a nice Christmassy picture and "wishing you the joys of the season ..."

and inside: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'

But the much larger truth is that John was proclaiming that something wonderful was about to happen. He clearly saw himself as the herald of God, preparing the way for the promised Messiah. Great joy was going to break out. Hopes were going to be fulfilled. He called people to get themselves ready for joy.

He did ask the people to repent, which may sound like giving up what we enjoy. The aspect we forget is that repentance is an act of hope. Repentance is not merely feeling sorry and giving things up. It is a complete turn around in one life. It is turning from something disastrous to something wonderful.

I must emphasise this: it is turning to something far better. It is like turning from eating canned soup to eating roast turkey, like turning from a dead end to an open highway, like turning from stagnant puddle to a bubbling spring.

This is the meaning of repentance: a turning of the direction of our life and the affections of our heart so that we become oriented on God and love the things God loves.

For John, it is turning away from the insidious lies, false values, deceits, injustices, bondages and hopelessness of the old era, towards the beauty, justice, truth and peace of the new age. What they were turning to, gloriously exceeded by far even the very best among the things they were turning from.

For John the baptiser, the old era was doomed, and rightly so. It was decaying and destined for the scrap heap. God was in charge and therefore a new age was close at hand. Repentance is a message of great hope and joy.

Now I wonder, what if John the Baptist were to walk into the halls of our government --- Do you think he might use the phrase that appears in his mouth in the Gospel of Luke: "You brood of vipers!" Would he point to 'the insidious lies, false values, deceits, injustices, bondages and hopelessness of the old era, towards the beauty, justice, truth and peace of a new age'.

SHAPE OF THE NEW AGE?

John was not sure of the shape of this new world. It was enough for him that it was of God and from God. It would have new values and a fair go for all the neglected and mistreated people who had no champion or saviour.

When tax collectors, those disgraced Jews who were contractors for the hated Romans, asked John how they should express their repentance, John answered: "Collect no more taxes than are honest and fair." To enquiries from soldiers who repented, he said: "No more wanton violence, no more looting, no false accusations." To ordinary people in the crowd who asked John how to live in preparation for the new age, the baptiser advised: "If you have two coats, share one with the person who has none. If you have food, share it with the hungry."

What would repentance look like in Ottawa? Queen's Park?

Perhaps it would mean everyone turning to talking together .. and listening.

Perhaps it would mean really listening to carefully thought new ideas, rather than the loudest voices claiming their space.

This week I watched as Prime Minister Trudeau remembered engineering students killed 30 years ago at the Ecole Polytechnique. For a moment, there was quiet, unified mourning, and serious reflection as members in the House of Commons paid attention to the reading of 14 names. Surely there are enough serious issues affecting people in our country, that this serious attending should spread throughout the week.

In John's time as in ours, the people were called to turn to a radical life-style with wonderful opportunities for practical justice and love and peace.

LET JOHN SPEAK TO US

Maybe it is time for us to travel into the wilderness and listen to John the baptiser. Sanity for us is to allow John to speak to us in the wilderness of our contemporary world. Let his challenge to repentance confront our present situation. Let the positive note outweigh the negative. Let the future he looked forward to entice us. Let the Messiah he longed for enthral us.

This remarkable prophet can lead us to a Christmas which is rooted in the radical issues of life, and which celebrates a joy which outrates all other pleasure or happiness.

Hymn VU 47: Still, Still, Still Tune: Still, Still, Still

Still, still, still: the night is calm and still.

The Christchild in his crib lies sleeping,
angels round him watch are keeping.

Still, still, still: the night is calm and still.

Sleep, sleep, sleep: sweet Jesus, softly sleep,
while Mary sings and gently holds you,
safely in her arms enfolds you.

Sleep, sleep, sleep: sweet Jesus softly sleep.

Joy, joy, joy; glad tidings of great joy!

For through God's holy incarnation

Christ is born for our salvation.

Joy, joy, joy; glad tidings of great joy!