# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT — DECEMBER 10, 2017
ISAIAH 40:1-11; PSALM 85:7-13; 2 PETER 3:8-15A; MARK 1:1-8

# EVERYBODY MATTERS

***MARK 1:1-8:*** *[The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*
*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,'"*
*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."]*

I raised my children in the Church and they went to Sunday School and all, but in adolescence, my son began a very anti-religion phase, and I respected his own journey on that. A story I love to tell, though, is that one day he was with me when I ran into a couple of friends and were talking about I-don't-even-remember-what, when someone made a reference to: "It's like the loaves and the fishes" – and we all laughed. And I, very surreptitiously, I thought, just moved my eyeball to see if Patrick got the reference, but he was super sharp, and he caught my sly eye movement and said in the drollest voice possible, "Yes, Mom, I know what the loaves and the fishes are."

Caught! But chalk one up for my awesome parenting! Or really, chalk one up for being raised with your holy books, and having important stories from your faith tradition be woven into the culture. It stays with you.

The Jews were a people who knew their holy writings, and the stories of the ancient prophets would have been ubiquitous in their cultural circles. The words of Isaiah would ring as common as a reference to the loaves and fishes now, but not just culturally – deeply and portentously in their heart and souls. And so Mark begins his Gospel today with words that already stirred deeply within the Jews, Isaiah's prophesy, echoed in John the Baptist as the *voice crying in the wilderness! Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.*

That sounds pretty portentous, but of course, Mark also says of John that he came out of the wilderness clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. So, a wild-haired hermit – kind of a nut, if you will, we might think. But Elijah, another of the major prophets they revered, is described in Second Kings (1:8) as "A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist..." So Mark gives a bold referent to Elijah that his hearers would immediately recognize – and here we've got Isaiah AND Elijah in the first sentences of Mark's Gospel, leading us to John the Baptist.

That's quite an august introduction, but people were indeed going to John the Baptist, because, you see, John being perceived as a prophet of that caliber was exciting, hopeful, something to wonder about. At that time, for the people of Israel, God had not spoken through the prophets for nearly 400 years! *(see Isaiah 29:10)*

But now… out on the edge of society, comes the voice of JOHN. And they knew something important was happening – so crazy hair and locusts aside – or maybe as a PLUS – people began to make their way out to see and to hear John. Could he really be the real thing: the first important prophet since Malachi? Oh yes, the Jews knew all about the ruckus of the prophets of old from their holy books. This was *their* chance to see it in action, to maybe participate in something legendary. Wouldn't you have gone?

I think of when my concert-loving son was 14 and convinced my brother to take him to Woodstock '99, so he could experience something of that legendary festival 30 years earlier that he had read about and people had talked about all his life (though I have to say it was before *my* time). He wanted to experience that cultural phenomenon first-hand!

We get that, right? So how much more did the Jews of Jesus' time come out to see this old-style prophet – who could just **maybe, finally** mean everything was going to change. Some probably came out of mere curiosity. But others, hungry for the message of repentance and the coming of the Kingdom – and liberation from harsh Roman oppression – they came to repent, confess their sins, and be baptized into something new.

We have the benefit of retrospect, of course. We know John was for real; that he stands at

the threshold between the Old and New Testaments. And here we are, today, the second Sunday of Advent, at the banks of the Jordan with John the Baptist. But if you take yourself out of our modern-eye familiarity with this passage and imagine yourself really there… it's an *edgy* place to be. *Things could happen!* But Advent, and the words of Isaiah, and the words of John the Baptist, and the coming of Christ just days ahead of us, should be pushing our own boundaries, stretching our careful comfort zones from the mundane to the wildly hopeful. Where's our hopeful edge as we prepare for Jesus here in *our* wild? What does it mean in our lives that the Messiah is coming?

I propose the challenge from John in today's Gospel that is still relevant for us now: are we ready to line up, washed in our baptismal water, and really prepare with hope for the one who continually baptizes us with the Holy Spirit? Can we move toward that wildly hopeful edge? In this season of anticipation and longing, what are our longings, both for ourselves and for our world? Because we are about to experience the Christmas phenomenon first-hand, if we come to it first-heart.

Alan Jones, the former dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, wrote: "What do you think was the hardest thing to believe for the early Christians? [It was] the shocking truth that everybody *matters.*"[1] When Jesus spent his time with undesirables, in an empire of conquered peoples and people deemed impure and less worthy, he shocked society with his living example of "everybody matters."

I think embracing that hope-filled belief pushes our edges, too: to live in a world, and to do our part to make it a world, where everybody matters. And, yes, I'm surely referring to holding strong in the face of our nation deliberately determining that there are groups of people among us who DON'T matter. But I'm just as much referring to each of <u>us</u> in our Advent longing: YOU matter.

That "the Word became flesh" is the common language of our holy books, right? I don't even have to discreetly raise an eyeball to see if you recognize that! The God who is being born on Christmas day is coming in YOUR flesh. YOU matter. And to walk alongside Jesus is the legendary experience we would run to, if we could. How many people, when asked "who are the five people from history you'd like to have dinner with" include Jesus first among them? So many, right? But the thing to remember in our Advent reflection is that we actually DO; we actually DO walk alongside Jesus, because Jesus walks alongside US. Because every step of Jesus' life shows everybody matters, including me, including you, even on our worst days. When we turn to him in our Advent preparation, he is already there. When we are drawn to more connection, it is because he is beckoning us. It always starts with Jesus.

It brings up for me the last lines of one of my favorite poems, by Jane Kenyon. It just goes straight to my core:

*I am the one whose love*

*overcomes you, already with you*

*when you think to call my name….* [2]

That's what it is. Because you matter that much.

In the quiet longing of Advent, can we show the world how much everybody matters? And can we trust God's love enough to really, deeply know how much we matter, even as we may ourselves struggle to believe it sometimes.

John the Baptist challenges us. But we don't just come as the curious who've read the holy books and want to see the "modern" version of the legendary prophets of old. We are the baptized, the believers, the repenters… the progeny, as Christians, of Jesus Christ – and as human beings, God's beloved children, heirs to his Kingdom. We come before him because we love Jesus, we believe in his promise, and we strive to live into his in-breaking kingdom. We're not perfect, but we are loved, and it is in living out this love that we live into our light in the darkness as Christians, and our hope as Christians. WE are participating in something more than legendary; we are participating in something eternal.

Let it make you wildly hopeful!

[1] Alan Jones, "Asking for a Sign," in *Goodness and Light,* edited by Michael Leach, James Keane, Doris Goodnough, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 101.

[2] Jane Kenyon, "Briefly It Enters, and Briefly Speaks," in *Cries of the Spirit: A Celebration of Women's Spirituality,* edited by Marilyn Sewell, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 239.

(Read it online at: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49765/briefly-it-enters-and-briefly-speaks)

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