

**Mark 1:1-8 (NRSV)**

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."

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Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

It happens, now and again, that I'll be trying to hear and understand the Word of God while God is trying to get my attention some other way. So I'll be busily reading or looking up references and translations, and God will be pulling at my sleeve or tapping me on the shoulder or knocking me on the head, anything to get me to pay attention. And so I find myself listening so intently for the Word of God that I can't hear God speaking. That was happening this week with today's Gospel reading.

The question I was asking myself is, "Why do all the Gospels tell us about John the Baptizer?" There aren't all that many stories or events that appear in all four Gospels. For example, the birth of Jesus

– Mark’s Gospel begins with today’s reading, and so Mark doesn’t really say anything about the birth of Jesus. No manger, no shepherds, no wise men, no angels. The first person Mark talks about apart from Jesus and Isaiah is John the Baptizer. And I was wondering why this might be.

This reading gives the impression that John is a kind of a wild man. He’s eating locusts and wild honey, and the camel’s hair coat *he’s* wearing comes from real camels. Mark’s Gospel wants to give the impression that he’s a fierce, wild, devout believer, someone who is absolutely committed to God and God’s reign, willing to give up everything, go out to the wilderness of the Jordan to “prepare the way of the Lord, to make his paths straight.” He knows he’s not the main attraction, he’s the messenger, and he’s about to meet the message.

The actual baptism of Jesus is the subject of a later reading in January on the day that the Baptism of the Lord is celebrated. This Sunday’s reading simply introduces John, but allows us to ask the question, “Why do all the Gospels tell us about John?”

Now, while I was thinking about this, all sorts of things were going on in the life of Saint Nicholas and in the larger world. Building of the North Wing started a new phase as the foundation footers were being poured and the walls of the lower floor were going in. The parking lot was full during the week with all the construction workers. Myself, I was just getting back from a wonderful visit with my daughter and her husband. We were all recovering from Safe Nights, which was just a wonderful experience. I’d gotten a nice thank you card from one of our homeless guests from the previous week. We were getting ready to have our service of comfort and hope, and I was getting in touch with some of the new families that had been visiting with us in previous weeks. We were arranging for a baptism and getting ready for Chrysalis. A regular busy week at Saint Nicholas.

But I'll also confess that there had been some disquieting news in the outside world. It was official, now, that our economy was in recession, though I doubt that news took anyone by surprise. The National Bureau of Economic Research, the people who make it a business to study the economy on a full-time basis, told us that we had been in a recession for a year now, and that the recession would likely be a long and a difficult one. There was a study out by the Barna Group who'd found that people who had been affected by the current economic woes -- which, of course, is nearly everyone -- that people affected by the slowdown were going to be reducing their contributions to their churches. And here we were starting a building program.

And some of our very faithful members were asking, "Are we doing the right thing, building now?" Is the church doing the right thing? Are we going in the right direction? How do we answer a question like that? And especially, how do I answer a question like that while I'm trying to write a sermon about the meaning of John the Baptizer?

You see, I was still thinking about why the Gospels say so much about John the Baptizer. He is a striking figure, after all, this fierce prophet out in the wilderness offering a baptism of repentance and yet calling those who follow him a "brood of vipers" and worse. And at the end of his life, this man, arguably the first Christian martyr, sends back to Jesus asking, "Are you the one?" "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" This man who had given his life for speaking the truth, to his followers and to Herod, this man wants, now, to know the truth himself -- "Are you the one?" Did I do the right thing?

And what does Jesus answer? Jesus, the son of God, anointed by the Spirit, attended by angels -- he could have, I suppose, called down a lightning bolt and fried John where he stood in jail. But Jesus understood what John was really asking and answered in love.

Jesus tells John's disciples, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." The people of God are doing what God commanded us to do.

And as I thought about this, I kept hearing this knocking on my head. Knock, knock, is anybody home? And I realized that at least one reason that the Gospels tell us about John the Baptizer is that John's question is the question of the faithful throughout the ages – Jesus, are you the one? Are we doing the right thing? Is the church doing what the church ought to do? Which way should we go?

And Jesus' answer to John, changed only a little, is a good one – "Go and tell the faithful what you hear and see." I only wish that through the ages the church had always been faithful enough to ask the question and that the church's leaders had been faithful enough to answer the same way Jesus did. So many abuses and so much waste could have been avoided.

You see, faithful believers at Saint Nicholas, and I confess I, too, were asking, "Is this the way we should go?" And I should have recognized that today's Gospel reading could give us the answer, Jesus' answer to John – "Tell the faithful what you see and hear. Tell them that the poor are fed and the homeless are housed. Tell them that strangers are welcomed and children are baptized and taught the Word of God. Tell them that those who mourn are comforted, that those who are ill are visited and that those who are troubled find peace. And blessed are those who take no offense."

It's interesting that these are the criteria for whether the church is doing what it ought to be doing – do we teach the Word, do we celebrate the sacraments rightly, do we care for the poor, the homeless, the sick, the child, the stranger. Love God, love others, teach and learn, serve the world.

Not, do we make a profit? Not, do we pay a dividend? Not, are we in the newspapers? Because we know quite well that there are churches that make a profit, churches that are “successful” in the world’s terms but that are way off course.

The faithful can and should ask often and honestly, “Are we doing the right thing as a church? Are we going in the right direction?” just as John asked Jesus, “Are you the one?” And if we can answer honestly the way Jesus answered John – “Tell the faithful what you see and hear,” if we can honestly say that the church is loving God, loving others, teaching and learning and serving the world, then that is the most faithful answer we can give. And if we can give this answer, we will continue to thrive and grow with God’s help.

Is it a coincidence that November was also our most successful month financially this year? I think not. You all felt the energy around the church during Safe Nights. A church that is doing God’s will in the world and in the community, that is offering people ways to grow in faith and service is a church that people will support whether the economic times are good or bad.

So, back to my original question. Why do all the Gospels tell the story of John the Baptizer? One reason might be that John the Baptizer can stand for all of the faithful in times of change and stress and uncertainty, who want to believe but also want to know that we are going in the right direction. And how do we know? “Tell the faithful what you see and hear. The church is alive and active, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, welcoming the stranger, comforting the sorrowful, baptizing and teaching and celebrating and serving the world. And blessed be those who take no offense.”  
Amen.