

## Mark 1:1-11

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St. Mary the Virgin

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday After the Epiphany, The Baptism of Our Lord

January 7, 2024

**1** The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son, <sup>2</sup> happened just as it was written about in the prophecy of Isaiah: *Look, I am sending my messenger before you. He will prepare your way,<sup>3</sup> a voice shouting in the wilderness: "Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight."* <sup>4</sup> John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. <sup>5</sup> Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. <sup>6</sup> John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."<sup>9</sup> About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. <sup>10</sup> While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. <sup>11</sup> And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness." (CEB)

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John the Baptist in most Advent pageants is usually a rough cut guy on a lonely quest to baptize Jews so that they might be saved from their sins. As we think of him he is pretty tame. Eccentric but harmless with a weird diet and dress. It is hard to see why he needed to be beheaded he is so harmless.

Judah was a backwater province in the Roman Empire, but it was an extremely unhappy backwater. As we saw in our troubled involvement in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, unhappy backwaters can cause much mischief to those in power in significant places. As the modern State of Israel is experiencing today, unhappy backwaters can cause much mischief to those in power in significant places. We believe that the First Century Jews were politically active and hostile to Roman rule and Pax Romana. John was, we imagine, part of the prophetic rebellion feeding the unrest endemic to Judah.

Unhappy backwaters exist in this country too. Many long for a past that never was. As the recent remarks of Nikki Haley show, Faulkner was right when he said: *The past isn't dead, it isn't even past<sup>1</sup>*. Our political system is in turmoil because some continue to believe in the myth of *The Lost Cause*. They cause trouble, not as righteous as that of John the Baptist, or as violent as that of Hamas, but nevertheless trouble, in our system. Today for many the events at the Capitol on the Feast of the Epiphany in

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<sup>1</sup> In Requiem for a Nun.

2021 are being cast in a new light, as Haley attempted to do with the causes of the Civil War. Unhappy backwaters can cause much mischief in this country and abroad<sup>2</sup>.

Here the unhappy ones are portraying themselves as the true Christians. They believe that there is a vast liberal/socialist conspiracy determined to undermine their futures simply because they are white. They only want to be treated as white people have always been treated. They don't realize that this means they want to be privileged. They understand John the Baptist as being on their side as they speak their truth to power. They misunderstand John the Baptist, Jesus Christ and the Gospel since we speak truth to power on behalf of those who have no privilege. John the Baptist was not defending White Privilege. He was beheaded for being with the powerless. The church has in the past defended white privilege. We no longer defend white privilege. To do so is to stand with Herod against John the Baptist and Christ Jesus. They were men of color. They were powerless.

In these opening verses Mark declares that the first witness to Christ Jesus was a firebrand who probably alienated many by his divisive message. Is there a place for firebrands in today's church?

Firebrands, that is, prophets, make us uncomfortable. In any event, I hope at this late hour that we realize that the church which accommodates itself to what is going on in the world by taking insipid political positions so as to inspire and challenge no one is not the church John the Baptist looked for and the one Jesus Christ was ultimately to inspire. Church is not a social service organization. Now I worked for a social service organization for 22 years and it's a worthy endeavor, but it isn't our mission. I was a direct service provider. I know what that means. It is not the mission of the church. Our mission includes, to dramatically overstate the case, daring to be provocative.

John was provocative.

We know that as we read further into Mark that John the Baptist will lose his head. He didn't lose it because he baptized Jews. He lost it because he spoke perhaps effectively, but certainly provocatively, against the powers that be. At the very end of Mark we know that Jesus will be crucified. He wasn't crucified because he told parables, healed a few people, fed the 5,000, and instituted the Eucharist. John the Baptist and Christ Jesus died because they were threats to the powers of the world. Imagine what a different world we would live in if the church was a threat to the powers of the world? I'm about to be provocative. If we truly wanted to be prophetic then we would stand clearly with the innocent in Gaza. This would not negate the horror inflicted by Hamas but it would clearly witness that Horror is never solved by creating more Horror. We would join Greta Thunberg and work actively to reverse global warming. We would do this because we understand that prophecy is not about being clairvoyant but instead prophecy is about making it hard for us to avoid acknowledging the consequences of our actions. If we truly wanted to be prophetic then we would join our bishops in decrying the way unarmed Black men are treated. We would point out the consequences on society as a whole when we treat Black men so harshly. We would point out that the difference between a protester and rioter is the color of their skin, not the cause they rally behind. We would do this because we understand that prophecy is not about being clairvoyant but instead prophecy is about making it hard for us to avoid acknowledging

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the distorting effects of Nostalgia listen to the January 4, 2024 edition of Throughline. [The Nostalgial Bone](https://www.npr.org/podcasts/510333/throughline): It's a rerun of a 2021 episode that I partially remember. <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/510333/throughline>

the consequences of our actions. There is, to use only these examples, no *reasonable* response to violence against innocents, racism or climate change. These issues require radical and immediate change. Instead, we temporize. We focus on the unforgettable and very personal and particular torture and murder Hamas inflicted on Israelis on October 7, and we excuse more Horror. We hear many saying that we have to moderate our liberal cry for justice or environmentalism or we will lose support. Many argue for reasoned moderate or conservative responses. They assume keeping peace in the pews is what Christianity is all about. We've forgotten Martin Luther King's *Letter From Birmingham Jail*.<sup>3</sup> We would do this because we understand that prophecy is not about being clairvoyant but instead prophecy is about making it hard for us to avoid acknowledging the consequences of our actions.

The view that the church must be reasonable to keep its membership and financial base was impressed upon me some years ago: *In an interview on CNBC, (January 2014) Home Depot founder and devout Catholic Ken Langone said that the Pope's statements about capitalism have left many potential "capitalist benefactors" wary of donating to the Church or its fundraising projects.*<sup>4</sup> In other words if you want to continue to have the funding to be a relevant church then don't say negative things about those who have the power of the purse. While this might be a good strategy for short-term fundraising in the end it leaves us a church not worth the effort.

So, we're at the start of a new year. We, clergy and lay members of the larger church, have focused frequently on building a church, the church in general, which provides social services, healing to the sick, absolution to sinners, succor to those who need it, sacraments to all who seek them and many other wonderful things. All of this work needs to be done but I hope we'll hold in mind as we read Mark this year that the Gospel begins with the proclamation of a man who will lose his head and just before it ends with the resurrection experiences, the crucifixion of our Savior. They didn't lose their lives because they failed at social services. They lost them because they saw evil in the world and named it.

Are we willing to be served up on a platter? Faithfulness to the Gospel means that white men, like me, must be willing to do more than say "tut tut". Black men are regularly served up on a platter. John the Baptist was served up on a platter. The times demand that the church and all its people join Jesus on the Cross and the Baptist on the platter and no longer tolerate moderation in the face of systemic evil, racism.

Where is the joy in this? Quite simply we will be about the holy task of making this world more like heaven, and we pray for that every time we say the Lord's Prayer. This holy task is the definition of joy because we're doing what we were created to do.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail>

<sup>4</sup> <http://prorevnews.blogspot.com/2014/01/a-good-reason-to-go-to-lowes.html>