

Mark 1:1-8
Peter R. Powell
St. Mary the Virgin
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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."

The lectionary wants us to focus this morning on the work of John the Baptist.¹ I will give the lectionary the benefit of the doubt and assume that it is attempting to keep us focused on Advent and not get ahead of ourselves by jumping into the ministry of Jesus. Certainly we make no progress in rehearsing the ministry of Jesus in the next 2 weeks with Gospel readings from John's prologue next week and Luke's opening the 4th week of Advent.

What we meet today is John the Baptist who 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're seeing in our unending involvement in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan unhappy backwaters can cause much mischief to those in power in significant places. We believe that the 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. We can get a better sense of him by perhaps seeing him as a

¹ I am aware that the quote from the OT is from Exodus, Malachi and 2nd Isaiah and that the portion from 2nd Isaiah is punctuated in the OT: A voice Cries, in the wilderness prepare... However that point is beyond the focus of this sermon.

Priest preaching in the United States about racial unrest and discrimination or global warming or the exercise of Pax Americana. But perhaps even better as Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton.

In these opening 8 verses Mark declares that the 1st 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? Among my many obsessions is my monitoring of the blog for people elected to be deputies to our General Convention coming up in 2015². While very few of the deputies elected to convention participate in this blog, some of those who do scare me. The church I see them arguing for is one in which the church accommodates itself to what is going on in the world by taking such insipid political positions as to inspire and challenge no one. It depicts a church striving to be 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. Our mission is to dare to be provocative.

John was provocative. He was willing to speak out loudly and persistently. I keep wishing I could preach a different sermon than I do but frequently in recent years, regardless of where I'm preaching, and I fill a number of pulpits during the year, I find the gospel challenging us to think about what it means to be the church. So I keep coming back to that theme. I wish I knew why it keeps reoccurring to me. When I listen to other clergy it is obvious that what I see in the text is not what they see. Sometimes I think they're blind but other times I think I might be. I say this just to tell you that I struggle with talking about the issue of what it means to be "church." I know other things are important and need to be preached but for the last couple of years they have eluded me.

So, we know that as we read 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? If we truly wanted to be prophetic then we would join our Presiding Bishop 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 your bishop and mine³ in decrying the way unarmed Black men are treated. We would point out, as Nicholas Kristof does, the consequences on society as a whole when we treat Black men so harshly. There is, to use only these two examples, no *reasonable* response to either issue. Both issues require radical and immediate change. Instead, when I read the blogs from our delegates to General Convention I hear many saying that we have to moderate our liberal cry for justice or environmentalism or we will lose more members. They argue for reasoned moderate or

² Anyone can follow the blog. Subscribe at Kibitzers mailing list

Kibitzers@hobd.org

<http://www.hobd.org/mailman/listinfo/kibitzers>

³ I am licensed in New York but my bishop is Ian Douglas, Connecticut.

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*.⁴

This viewpoint was impressed upon me on January 1 of this year *In an interview on CNBC, 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.*⁵ 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 church 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.

Whose job is it to name evil? Perhaps not the preacher's job since you have no effective way of responding. I began attending this church in 2002 because I was seeking a community to provide me with the spiritual resources to continue a ministry of advocacy for the poor. St. Mary's was and is important to me. What I hope for from the sermons on what it means to be church is that you understand that you are church and as church your mission is to aggressively fight against evil as you encounter it in your lives.

The Pastoral work of the church is important and I am poorly suited for it. I served as a panelist and the moderator at a recent meeting of the retired clergy in Connecticut and I confessed that I am a Pastoral Oaf. I am grateful that the church embraces all of the signs that make it a safe place. I am glad that you have clergy who are skilled pastorally. I'm not one of them. However as one whose ministry was spent trying to get people to accept the consequences of their faith and provide housing and services to the homeless I am aware that having found a safe place we are then called to venture out and challenge the world. Mark begins with John the Baptist pointing to Christ and we are grateful for that. But as we read into Mark we discover that John the Baptist will lose his head and we should be grateful for that too.

⁴ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail>

⁵ <http://prorevnews.blogspot.com/2014/01/a-good-reason-to-go-to-lowes.html>