

“Johnny Be Good”

“What two things do Winnie the Pooh, John the Baptist, and Smokey the Bear have in common? They all like to eat honey, and they all have the same middle name.”

I do not often start a sermon with a joke, but when I do you can be sure that they will be bad. In this case I think it is appropriate because we often treat John the Baptist like a joke. Whenever we talk about him we always mention his odd clothes and unusual diet. We roll our eyes when we hear him rage against the sinners. We chuckle a little when he calls his listeners “A brood of vipers.” If we have any picture in our minds at all it is of the person standing in the park ranting at the crowd or a clever New Yorker cartoon with the central figure being a ragged man carrying a sign that reads, “The end is near.” John the Baptizer (he was not a Baptist in the denominational sense) has become a parody of himself in the secular and religious worlds.



“Can you be more specific?”

You might find it interesting to know that the writers of the Gospels might be pleased. Each of the four gospels mentions John the Baptist upfront in the account of Jesus. Each of the Gospels goes to great lengths to point out that John is not the Messiah. In each case John will at some point say that he is not the Messiah and point to Jesus as the one.

Some of John’s followers believed he was the Messiah. The gospel writers needed to redirect those believers to Jesus. They wanted everyone to know that John was the one preparing the world for the Messiah, and not the Messiah himself. They wanted people who heard the story of Jesus not to be distracted by questions about John. They wanted the world to know that John was the warm up act and not the headliner.

To that end Mark has John say, “I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.”¹ They also repurpose a passage from Isaiah which in context meant for the Jews in exile to prepare the way for God in their hearts that they might return to their home in Jerusalem. The evangelists use that passage to indicate that John was to prepare the way for Jesus. By the way, I am glad they did otherwise we would not have wonderful music including the inspiring song from “Godspell.”²

John was a powerful figure. His clothes and diet which seem so weird to us are indications that he was a Nazirite. Nazirites were men who were dedicated in service to God from birth. They had dietary restrictions, were not to cut their hair, and had to keep themselves ritually clean. There is an indication that John was so dedicated in the Lukan birth story of John, when the Angel Gabriel tells the Zechariah that John “is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.” Samson is another biblical figure who was a Nazirite, thus the long hair.

¹ Mark 1:7b NRSV

² Specifically, “Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord” by Stephen Schwartz.

In addition to being a Nazirite, John is considered a prophet like the prophets of old, such as Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Indeed, some scholars call John the last of the Old Testament prophets for his fierce call to Israel to repent. Given the difficult times that the people of Israel were enduring under Roman hegemony, his call to repent inspired many to believe his was also a call for Israel's redemption. They believed that by cleansing themselves from sin they were collectively cleansing the nation of its sin. It was the first step back into God's favor which would ultimately free them from Roman oppression. His ministry was important and drew people from all over Israel. His fame and importance led the gospel writers make a point of taking the focus off of him and putting it onto Jesus lest anyone be confused.

Mark's Gospel which we read today with the very first words states what is important. Mark does not pussyfoot around. His first words are "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."³ If his readers and listeners had any doubts about Mark's intentions or beliefs he lays them to rest at the outset. There is no birth narrative, stable, shepherds or magi. There is no genealogy going back to King David or Abraham. There is no explanation of John's birth, just the bald and bold statement, "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

John points to Jesus as Messiah and Christ and we are to do the same. In Advent we are reminded to point out to the world around us that Jesus is Messiah. During one of the most tumultuous times of the year we are to point to Jesus, and not rampant consumerism, as the reason for the season. Is it bad to buy presents for friends and family? Absolutely not. But the greatest gift we can give anyone is the knowledge that Jesus was born not to create profits for retailers, but to create space in our hearts for loving God and each other.

It was a big task to spend a long time in the desert discerning God's call as did John. It was a big task for anyone to preach repentance to an entire nation including the oppressors. It was a big task for John to use his fame to point away from himself. He had to be so free of ego that he could gather people around him only to point them to one beyond himself, the one he calls "the lamb of God."⁴

Let us all search our hearts and spirits during this Advent season to see how we can turn our lives into lives that point not to what we have done but to what God has done for us, especially by giving us the gift of a babe born in a manger to impoverished parents; all so that we might learn the power and wonder of God's love for us and all humankind. "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved."⁵

³ Mark 1:1 NRSV

⁴ John 1:36 NRSV

⁵ John 3:17 KJV