

Preached at Emmanuel, Chestertown 12/4/22 Advent 2A

Good morning people of Emmanuel! It is so good to be here with you! But, whew, what Gospel text for my first outing in this pulpit. Nothing like, “hello you brood of vipers” to start off a ministry!

Having said that, though, John the Baptist is one of the most fascinating, exotic characters in the Gospels. An odd figure who, in each of the Gospels, first appears in the wilderness, bellowing at the gathered crowds to repent. Standing wild eyed up to his knees in the Jordan river, scruffy, long haired, and skinny as a rail. Dressed in camel’s hair with a leather belt. Which, as any Hebrew Scripture buff will tell you, is exactly what Elijah wore about 800 years earlier. Matthew is not too subtly telling us exactly who this man is, a messenger -a prophet in the mold of those of ancient times. The ones God would send to get Israel’s’ attention-to let the people know they were heading down the wrong track and God was getting a little riled up.

And, despite the rather off-putting description of him, apparently people were eager to see and hear him-the crowds just kept showing up. Maybe I am too timid, but I am pretty sure I would have avoided that particular trek to the desert-the pilgrimage to meet a wild and unconventional man. John sounds too much like the guys who stand on the street corners in Philly

with bull horns, a bit wild in the eyes, yelling at all of us sinners to straighten up soon or we will find ourselves on the express train to hell. The fascinating difference between John and these bull horn wielding prophets, seems to me to be one of location. They plant themselves in the middle of the streets- right in your face. But John planted himself far from the city with its Temple and its schools, its learned people, he planted himself in the middle of the wilderness, nowhere. Far enough away from civilization that anyone who wanted to see him had to make a real effort, travel a long distance, with no water fountains or rest stops along the way, and with bandits behind every rock. Why would someone do that? Wander away from Jerusalem and all the accumulated knowledge of the religious establishment? Why not just attend an extra service or go hang out with one of the priests if you wanted to get closer to God? Anyone who headed out to the wilderness seeking John out was looking for something the Temple and its religious leaders couldn't or wouldn't supply.

And, unlike those religious folk who were used to speaking for God and seemed to know an awful lot about exactly what God thought and did, John didn't really have much in the way of details. He didn't even know the name of the One about whom he spoke. What he did know was that God was up

to something, that the old world was on its way out and a new one was on its way in.

The old world was one in which the Temple in Jerusalem had gotten a little too enamored with priestly hocus-pocus, temple taxes, prominent displays of piety. The world John was envisioning was not going to be made out of these rearranged stones of old religion which seemed to be covering the Holy Spirit up, but with new materials. So God, through John, took a big breath, collected the Holy self, and moved out where the air was clear, where the only light was the stars, and where the messenger was the most unlikely and socially unacceptable character one could imagine. Get ready, the Holy Spirit said to John, get ready John said to the crowds. It is time. Prepare the way. It's happening now-someone is coming who is so spectacular that we can't just hang around waiting but we need to prepare. Prepare so that Someone could walk a straight path right into our doors and hearts.

That was the Good News that John preached and that people found so attractive- attractive enough to wander out into the middle of God knows where and meet this wild man and get ready. They showed up by the thousands drawn to the chance to come clean, to start over, to stop pretending they were someone else. And they let John wash them off-wash

away all of what was weighing them down. The religious leaders were appalled that John didn't seem to have any standards about who could get into the river and be bathed. Women, very public sinners, the poor, the sick-no standards at all. John baptized a whole host of people who would not have been let into the Temple and probably wouldn't even have tried. John's baptism bypassed all of the rules and rituals- all the trappings of polite civilization. He bellowed at rich, poor, male, female, sinners, self proclaimed saints, "wake up, turn around- don't miss what God is doing right now!"

Perhaps the most fascinating thing about this whole John story is that he was nowhere near a church at all. And those who stayed inside the church's beautiful walls never heard him and his message. The only folks who heard him were the ones willing to walk into the unknown and the uncomfortable- willing to follow John outside their comfort zone and into the wilderness, which, strangely enough, is exactly where that Someone chose to show up.

I am guessing the wilderness looks different for each of us. And I am guessing each of us has a very carefully thought out list of reasons we should avoid it like the plague- wary of the wild eyed prophet who might be

out there. We are comfortable, well fed, happy with our walls, our churches, and our civilization. Why should we go off hunting for God?

The only reason I can think of is that there is a voice crying out in the wilderness...sort of faint, hard to hear at times through thick walls, but there. If the only place we try to hear that voice is in the church we will only get half the message. Because the good news is always beginning somewhere out there- out in the world for those with ears to hear and hearts to go wherever the way may lead.