

Sermon - Advent III – Christ Church, Garden City

John 1:6-8, 19-26

Our gospel reading this morning gives us another account of John the Baptist. Mark, Luke and John give prominence to the story of John the Baptizer in the opening sections of their accounts of the good news of Jesus Christ. Mark and John focus on John's ministry of repentance and baptism from the wilderness across the Jordan River.

Luke however opens with the account of the prophecy of John's birth and the miracle of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Luke weaves together the stories of John and Jesus' beginnings with the purpose of elevating the man John who would play such an important part in heralding the coming of the person Jesus.

John the Baptist was a witness who testified to the coming light that would be Jesus. It was as if he had been specifically conceived and born for this purpose. John gave his testimony not in the center of Jewish power, or in the temple or from a throne. He gave his testimony from the wilderness, far from the cities and villages of the region.

John must have been a charismatic person because he was able to attract men and women from the surrounding towns and villages out to the wilderness where he was baptizing. His message of repentance must have been powerful as the interest in it was significant, so much so that the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to find out who he was.

We know from other scriptural testimony that there was a plethora of prophetic voices in the region at the time. God ordained John's voice and his message resonated with those that heard it. What would have started as a trickle soon became a torrent of interest. We shouldn't forget that his message was only conveyed across the region by word of mouth. No TV shows or blogs or emails or social media to spread the word. This was personal witness that was so inspiring it opened people's hearts and drew many to seek repentance and baptism.

Knowing your own heart would you have travelled to the wilderness to hear from this seemingly wild man and to be baptized by him? Would his message of repentance and his foretelling of Jesus life been enough for you to be drawn away from your home? I guess today the parallel would be to hear about this naturalist man, living in one of the State Parks on Long Island that was drawing people from the villages in order to baptize them. If we heard this we would probably prefer to stay home and watch Joel Osteen on TV skeptical that anyone that lives off the land in a state park would be a little crazy. When we make a physical journey however to a life-changing event, drawn by the spirit of God, we are profoundly impacted. Staying at home doesn't quite have the same effect on us.

In May of 1979 I was 16 years old. I'd been working as an apprentice carpenter for 5 months and I was living at home with my parents. I was part of our local Anglican Church because the church was the faith and social hub for our family. I was drifting though, bored with church and not wanting to join the youth group. 18 months before I had become a

volunteer beach lifeguard and I found the weekends on the beach to be far more exciting than church.

Also in May of 1979 the Baptist preacher Billy Graham brought his well-polished crusade to Sydney. It was to be his 257th crusade. One cold Sunday afternoon at an inner-city racecourse some 50,000 people came to hear his inspiring message of the power and love of Jesus Christ. I remember sitting up in the grandstand with my family looking down on a vast infield of people and a huge stage that was encompassed by the biggest choir I'd ever seen. George Beverly Shea led the gospel singing with his unforgettable bass baritone voice.

When the crowd was warmed up Billy Graham came to the stage. His voice rang out across the vast racecourse but I don't remember anything he said except one thing, which I remember vividly. A crusade lead by Billy Graham always reached its crescendo with an invitation to go forward and to give your life to Jesus Chris, right there, right then. His voice started off low and quiet, a soft invitation. Soon his voice built as the choir and music intensified and the invitation seemed to become a matter of life and death.

At first I watched as one person went forward, then another, soon people close to me were going forward. I was a little mesmerized by it all but soon felt a stirring in my own heart. It wasn't long before I felt I couldn't sit any longer and I had to go forward. So up I got and made my way alone down the stairs of the grandstand and out onto the racetrack and into a sea of unfamiliar faces. All had felt the call to surrender their lives to Jesus there and then. The feeling inside of me was powerful and I couldn't resist it. The Holy Spirit energized me and with a singular focus I went forward. I was met by a young man who took my name and details. He then prayed with me before Billy Graham prayed for all of us who had gone forward.

Billy Graham organized some 417 crusades in 185 countries throughout his active ministry life, a feat not repeated since. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people went forward at his crusades and gave their life to Jesus Christ because of his invitation. He had a profound effect on this world and on me personally. I still tear up when I sing How Great Thou Art.

John the Baptist had just one crusade that we know of and that was held "across the Jordan River, near Bethany." We don't know how many people felt the call and ventured out into the wilderness to meet him. It must have been many because it attracted the attention of the Pharisees. They wanted to know who he was and what he was doing.

John's message of repentance and baptism with water resonated with many. Like Billy Graham after him he heralded Jesus as the messiah, the savior of the world. It would be Jesus who would be coming to baptize them with the Holy Spirit of God. John told the Pharisees that the messiah, the one, was already amongst them but they did not know it. They were blind. A light had been brought into their midst but they were unaware of it.

John was a brave and daring man and had the courage to leave his family and the security of his life to venture out into the unknown wilderness because he felt called to proclaim the

good news. His prophetic pilgrimage was founded on his faith and his sense of mission. This was his calling and God ordained purpose. He seemed unfazed by this mission and by the realities of living in a wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey and having to find animal skins for clothing. He also seemed unfazed by the religious power figures that descended upon him demanding to know who he was.

In some sense our church has come a long way since the days of John the Baptist. In other ways though it hasn't progressed very much. In the Episcopal Church, like most Anglican churches, we tend to be a sedate group of people, not given to public evangelism. The Book of Common Prayer that is integral to our worship lives does not provide space for an altar call or a time to invite forward those who may want to make a public attestation of their faith. We tend not to organize crusades in our cities and towns and we seem to shy away from encouraging people to surrender to Jesus. As a community of faith committed to helping people restore their lives with God, we should try and find ways to do this work. If not we may become roadblocks to the work of the Holy Spirit in our communities.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me" says the prophet Isaiah. "The Lord God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed," to bind up, to proclaim, to provide, to give, to build and to repair. The Lord God has called us to action and not complacency. "For as the earth brings forth it's shoots, and as the garden causes what is sown to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations." The Lord will cause changes in the world through our action. Faith without action is dead says the writer of the book of James.

In this season of Advent, as we reflect on the waiting time before the light of Jesus became incarnate in human flesh, we can spend some quiet time meditating on how God is calling us all to action, to be active witnesses to God's love and redeeming power for all people. Advent is the perfect time for this spiritual exercise and I commend it to you.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon you.
Amen