

Reverend John E. McGinn, Rector  
Saint John's Episcopal Church  
Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

December 4, 2011  
Second Sunday of Advent

Today's sermon is taken from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 1, verses 1-7.

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen*

A three-year-old was helping his mother unpack their Nativity set. He announced each piece as he unwrapped it from the tissue paper. "Here's the donkey," he said, "Here's a king and a camel." And when he finally got to the tiny infant lying in a manger, he proclaimed, "Here's the baby Jesus in a car seat." (laughter) Well, it wasn't a car seat, but that would be an easy mistake to make, wouldn't it? We all love Nativity scenes, baby Jesus in the manger, Mary and Joseph hovering reverently over the holy child, shepherds, wise men, assorted cattle, sheep and camels, and of course, a donkey. But as someone has noted, there is always one person missing from these Nativity scenes.

Now correct me if I'm wrong, for I imagine that collectively we have seen a tremendous amount of Christmas displays, so if you've found him somewhere, please let me know. Have you ever seen John the Baptist in any Nativity scenes? He would be this hairy, unkempt, wild-looking guy wearing camel's hair. There would be a piece of locust caught between his teeth and dried honey in his beard. And louder than any Santa says "Ho ho ho" you would hear the automated voice of John the Baptist screaming, "The Kingdom of Heaven is near!" Has anyone notice a figure like that in any of the Nativity scenes that are traditional to our celebration of Christmas? Probably not; at least I've never seen a Nativity scene featuring John the Baptist.

Yet, on the second Sunday of Advent we always encounter this strange, lonely figure sounding his message out in the wilderness. "Prepare the way for the Lord." Of course, here at St. John's we are very familiar with John the Baptist because he's patron saint, and as we look around we see many different depictions of him, particularly in our stained glass windows.

The gospels give us a rough outline of John's life. According to Luke, John

was Jesus' second cousin. John also was the product of a miraculous birth. His parents were both quite elderly when John was born, and according to Luke's account before the angel Gabriel was dispatched to the Virgin Mary he first appeared to an elderly priest named Zachariah, and at the time Zachariah was in the temple performing his priestly functions. Gabriel told Zachariah that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son even though she was far past normal child-bearing age. Zachariah became literally speechless at this announcement. His speech did not return until he named his newborn son John.

John the Baptist came from good stock. Both Zachariah and Elizabeth were of priestly lineage. Elizabeth was about six months pregnant when her much younger cousin Mary came to her and announced that she also had conceived a child, but this child was of the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth's unborn child jumped for joy in her womb at Mary's announcement. So John the Baptist's birth was a very special event, just as Jesus' birth was very special. We know nothing of John's childhood, but we have a very vivid picture of him as an adult. He was a preacher of justice and righteousness who called people to a baptism of repentance, and people poured out of Jerusalem to hear John preach his austere message. Among those who came to John to be baptized was his cousin Jesus. The gospel of Matthew tells us that John was reluctant to baptize Jesus. "I need to be baptized by you," he said. And Jesus persuaded John to baptize him nonetheless.

The scriptures are also very clear about John's role in the drama of the Nativity. John was to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. And according to Luke 1, verse 17, John's role was "to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just and to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Now, there's several passages from the Old Testament which are prophetic of John the Baptist in this role. These include Malachi chapter 3 that refers to a prophet who would prepare the way of the Lord. "Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me." The Jews of Jesus' day expected Elijah to come from the Messiah. Indeed some modern Jews continue to await Elijah's coming. This is why the disciples asked Jesus in Matthew 17, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come?" And Jesus tells his disciples that Elijah had already come in the person of John the Baptist; this was John's role -- to prepare the way.

John's message was one of righteousness and justice. John's message was much more austere than that of Jesus. But we think it was necessary. People needed to know what was at stake before they could be receptive to the work

of a redeemer, a Messiah, Jesus. John the Baptist came to telling people to wash themselves. He didn't know of ways to protect the physical health of people, but he knew what you must do to protect your spiritual health -- wash away your sins. And that's what John's baptism was all about. You can't prepare the way for the Lord unless you rid yourself of sin. And that's true for us as well, as it was for the people who heard John preach.

If you have difficulty getting into the Christmas spirit, look into your heart and see if the problem could be greed or lust or anger or resentment or guilt. Sin always robs us of our joy regardless of the season of the year. You and I need to repent on our sins as well. Our situation may not be desperate, but we also have our issues with sin. Perhaps it is the sin of being obsessed with our own needs and concerns. Perhaps it is the sin of being obsessed with materialism and greed. It may consist simply of a blindness to the needs of others around us.

A Peanuts cartoon strip featured Linus writing a letter to Santa Claus. "Dear Santa: Please don't bother to come to my house this year. I realize that there are many children who will not have a Christmas at all. Go to someone more needy." Lucy walks by and happens to read the letter. In exasperation, she says, "What kind of letter is that?" And Linus responds, "I'm hoping he'll find my attitude particularly refreshing."

Well, I expect that Santa would find it refreshing. That is not where most of us are; and I'm not talking about just children, it's true of adults too. The more we have, the more we feel we need, and the more we feel we need, the less we feel we have to share with others. And Christmas ironically brings out the worst in us. In Jesus' name we go on a hedonistic binge that mocks the Savior born in a stable among the least and the lowest.

I was amused to read a review of a Christmas song that pop singer Cliff Richard released in England a few years ago. The song reached the top ten charts in Great Britain. The lyrics of the song titled *Savior's Day* reflect Cliff Richard's Christian faith and included lines such as "Life can be yours on Savior's Day. Don't look back or turn away."

A pop magazine reviewed the song. The reviewer wrote these words about the *Savior's Day*. "The song is okay," the reviewer said, "but there's no holly, no mistletoe, no wine, no presents around the tree, no Santa. In fact," wrote the reviewer, "this song hasn't got anything to do with Christmas at all." If that doesn't make you laugh, it will make you cry.

What have we done to Jesus' birthday? John the Baptist would probably have a few choice words to say about that. In essence, he would tell us to repent. He would tell us to open our hearts to the real meaning of Christmas. He would help us look beyond our own needs for the needs of those less fortunate. "Prepare ye the way of the Lord."

We're all too much like a proud mother, interestingly enough, named Mary. Mary was trying to get her son ready for the church's annual Christmas program. Certain that the whole church clamored for six-year-old Billy's great talent, she looked forward teaching him Joseph's part. When he was only selected to play a wise man in the program, she decided he would be the best looking wise man in the program. Though she had an impossible holiday schedule, Mary frantically finished making the costume complete with bushy, fake fur beard.

The pageant was magnificent, especially Billy, and especially all the beautiful Carols the children sang. Mary praised Billy to the stars for singing them all. And then the director announced they were trying to establish a new wardrobe closet where costumes could be accumulated for future pageants, and would the children donate their costume. Mary urged Billy to donate his, which he did except for the beard which he continued to wear. Pressing him to hurry so that they could go on to the next thing on their schedule, he refused to give up the beard. "Why, Billy?" Mary asked. "Mom," said Billy, "You know those songs on the pageant? I never learned them. With this beard on, I can just move my mouth and nobody knew." Mary said, thinking of her busy, meaningless schedule, "That was when it hit me. I was going through the motions of Christmas when I didn't know the song."

Do you know the real song of Christmas? John the Baptist did. Billy's mother Mary did when she stopped long enough to reflect. It's about preparing the way of the Lord, by repenting of our sins and opening our hearts to the God of love. Are you ready this year for Christmas? Do you need to hear the voice of John cry "Repent?"

*Amen*

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs