

Sermon for Advent 4 – John 1:19-28

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

“...The Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask [John the Baptizer], ‘Who are you?’” John the Baptizer never really did ‘fit in.’ Of course we can look at his diet of honey and locusts and call it unusual. We look at his wardrobe of camel’s hair and say that it’s out of the ordinary. His mangy and uncut Nazarite hair was unkempt. His choice to dwell in the desert wilderness away from civilization was certainly not normal. While all these characteristics might make us uncomfortable, they are certainly forgivable and even able to be overlooked.

But there is something more about John the Baptizer that sets him apart. He had an independent quality which is hard to define. We could call it boldness. Or confidence. What it really amounts to is the courage to face any antagonism no matter what that cost. This defined John the Baptizer.

John called people out into the wilderness. He called men away from the temple and synagogues. He called them away from their hallowed habitations. He called them to the desert to confront there the bare majesty of the God whom Israel knew before Israel had a Holy Land, a Holy City, and a holy temple. John cut across the pattern with a vengeance. He would not become the super serviceable knave in soft raiment. He remained John the Baptizer. He starkly went against the powerful current of public opinion. He baptized the harlot, the Roman soldier, the tax collector, yes, everyone who would repent of their sins. He called the Pharisees and Sadducees a generation of vipers and pulled the rug of their genealogy out from under their feet. He stripped them of their self-proclaimed heritage as sons of Abraham. He told King Herod that it was not lawful to have another man’s wife. Without exception, John the Baptizer put all of Israel, even the temple hierarchy and the pious Sadducees and Pharisees, on the same level as the unclean and godless Gentile. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. All must be washed in a Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

John’s message was radical, to say the least. All were sinners! No one could produce righteousness on his own! It’s a lot different than the common thought in that day of watering down the law to make it achievable, or whittling down the commandments as to let some escape unscathed. The Baptizer went against the grain: all men sin. All stand condemned against the law. He was intent that all people must repent and believe. But that’s what made the people of that day uncomfortable and what makes us uncomfortable about John the Baptizer. We have a passion to belong. We are avid for acceptance. We yearn for security and fear renouncing the majority. It’s nice to be normal. It’s nice to be accepted. It’s nice to belong theologically and socially. But when these wishes stand in the way of truth, then they are only the

pursuit of a lie. John preached this to the Pharisees of his day and also to the Pharisees today. And it's not difficult to find the Pharisees of our day; they're not hard to come by. Just look in the mirror.

While Herod, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees hated John, they also feared and respected him. They sent messengers to investigate his testimony. "Who are you? ... Are you Elijah? ... Are you the Prophet? ..." The final question is akin to asking, "Are you the Christ?" which, to them, seemed to be a real possibility. John, of course, answered: "No!" But do we? Of course, no one is so unabashed and arrogant to call themselves the Christ (unless they have serious mental problems). No one is so egotistical to put themselves in the place of God. Or are we? Well, no one is so brazen to say, "I am God!" No, we're a bit more subtle than that. Every transgression against the 10 Commandments is a breaking of the first and greatest Commandment: "You shall have no other gods." Every time we steal money, time, or even petty things from our employer, we are telling God, "You have not provided for me in the way in which I deserve. Therefore, I will take for myself." We put ourselves in the place of God. Every time we look at a man or woman lustfully whom God has not given us in holy marriage, we are telling God, "You have not given me a spouse, or the spouse I desire, therefore, I will take them, even if only in my own mind." We put ourselves in the place of God. Whenever we disrespect our parents and other authorities whom God has put over us, we are telling God, "I despise them, and I despise you, and I can do a better job by overseeing myself."

Strikingly, there is good news that comes out of this: There is a God and you're not Him. He is the Savior proclaimed by the voice of the one crying in the wilderness. This God is the One who is greater than John and every other prophet. He tears down the subtle and self-proclaimed sham deities whom we constantly worship and adore, and He raises up redeemed creatures who live in communion with their Creator. This God is the one who baptizes with water and the Holy Spirit, who causes the desert to bloom and makes dead dry bones to live.

John the Baptizer knew the Christ when He proclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" We also know Him when we sing, "O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us." That's God's answer, God's triumphant answer to our sins. We commemorate and proclaim the suffering, death, and resurrection of Lamb of God when we receive His Body given for us, and His Blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins. The Lord's Supper is God's mighty and victorious reachdown into the depths from which we cry. The sacrifice of the Lamb for our sins was a costly answer, but it is the only answer. And our "Amen" is the best reply. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠