

“A Prophet in the Wilderness”
Sermon by Rev. David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
January 28, 2018
Scripture: Mark 1:4-11

Where did you learn that you were loved? Who told you that you were important? When did you first feel like you really belonged? Hold on to those questions this morning.

Jesus – like so many others – went out into the desert.

Last week we heard about the prophet Jonah – called by God to go into the big city of Nineveh to preach a message of repentance. Nineveh - the capitol city of the Assyrian Empire. So large it would take three days to walk across it, the Bible said (Jonah 3:3). Today we learn about a prophet outside the settled areas; a prophet in the wilderness – who was preaching a message of purpose. Of belonging. Of basic bone-deep identity.

This prophet is the kind of guy who seems to be more at home out in the wilderness than he would in the big city. Mark spends a minute describing his appearance. Clothed with camel's hair - scratchy material. With a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. In my mind, he has a long beard, and rather wild hair and grasshopper legs are caught in his whiskers.

I don't know if you know this or not, but crickets are kind of an in thing these days. Minnesota State Parks have packets of crickets available for purchase. As food. For humans. You can get Sour Cream and Onion crickets, or Salt & Vinegar crickets, or Bacon and Cheese crickets. The product description says, "The other green meat!"¹ Inexpensive and an eco-friendly source of protein. Some say they are a real delicacy.

Even in the time of the gospels, I think this description of John's diet was meant to shock. To help us understand that this prophet was more comfortable out in the wilderness than in high society. More comfortable eating around a campfire than at a banquet table.

Instead of the prophet going into the city, like last week, this time, people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him. Surely that is hyperbole. Not ALL the people of Jerusalem. But a lot. Going out to the desert - to hear a prophet gaining attention. To be part of a cultural happening. Like Woodstock. Or Burning Man. Or something. People were going out - on a pilgrimage - out from their daily settled lives and into the unfamiliar. To the desert.

And out in the desert - even if others are traveling around you - your senses are heightened. The daily rhythms of life - get up, shower, eat breakfast in the car, go to work, open your email inbox . . . they all change out in the wilderness. You need to use or develop new skills for setting up tents and cooking food and getting drinking water. And you walk. And

while you walk, you might talk, or let your thoughts wander. There on a pilgrimage, you might be more open to hearing messages that might change your life.

John was such a draw that people were leaving their settled lives, leaving polite society, to go on a pilgrimage to hear what this wild-looking prophet had to say. And he had an action to accompany his message of repentance. To symbolize, to help get started with a new way of life, it would be baptism in the river Jordan.

5th graders at my daughter's elementary school have a twenty-five year tradition of going up to the Y's Camp Widjiwagan on the edge of the Boundary Waters. They go for a week of environmental learning during the late winter. And there they are challenged to try things like eco-walks, and learn how to cook outdoors, and depend upon their classmates. No electronics allowed. Flush toilets, but they might be a long walk away. No showers or baths. Until the last day when they experience a ritual that helps in their thinking of crossing a threshold from elementary school into the middle school years. Something that requires bravery. And will be worthy of a story for years to come. A sauna, followed by walking to a hole cut in the ice of the lake. And there they will jump in. Cleansed, ready to head in a new direction. And they will emerge with steam coming off their bodies, their minds exhilarated. Spirits renewed. As they come out of the water they might hear words - their own or others - you got this. Way to go. I'm proud of you. You can handle what gets thrown your way.

The prophet John was out in the wilderness, preaching the need for repentance - for turning around - so as to prepare for the one who was to come. To repent and prepare for the coming kingdom of God. And then, before going home, they went into the water. This ritual of baptism. A symbolic and very real cleansing. Dedication to a purpose and a claiming of an identity.

Jesus went out with all these other folks, to hear John. All four gospels tell us that Jesus was baptized and try to capture what happened in that moment. Mark puts it this way. "Just as he was coming out the water, [Mark says that] he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:10-11).

Out in the wilderness, Jesus had an epiphany. A sudden glimpse of the divine. A new understanding about he who was. And that voice from the heavens would serve as a guidepost, a reminder, a mantra for when the way ahead was not as clear, to remind him of his identity and calling when friends would abandon him and critics would try to ensnare him with controversies.

The story of Jonah exemplifies a detail about prophets that should not be overlooked in our story today. We saw last week how Jonah felt lonely and had difficulty getting along with others. It can be easy, I know, for the important pursuit of righteousness to become, or appear like, self-righteousness, which is a less noble and attractive quality. Not yet apparent in our introductory story from chapter one, the gospels give glimpses that there were tensions between John and Jesus.

John was the prophet calling out from the margins. With thunderous calls for repentance and frequent warnings of destruction. And John lived out his message. Fasting and protesting and putting his body on the line. He gave up a lot - doing what he thought was required to resist the old kingdom and prepare the coming kingdom of God. challenges the powers that be in the settled areas.

And it appears he wondered whether Jesus was going far enough. We don't get to see all the tensions between the two, so we must speculate. Did Jesus speak too often of forgiveness? Did Jesus welcome folks that John thought would not be helpful? We don't hear about Jesus fasting, or sticking to a diet of locusts.

John had his followers but they could not keep him from being imprisoned. Two of the gospels tell the story of John in prison, hearing about what Jesus was doing, and sending messengers to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Matt 11:2-3).

And Jesus offers a summary of his ministry that comes across rather sharply.

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." (Matt. 11:4-6)

John would gain what some describe as "the prophet's reward." In a grisly scene in the gospels (Matt. 14:3-12; Mar 6:17-29) John is beheaded at the request of Herod's mistress's daughter. The man and his message was viewed as a threat to the rich and powerful. To those who cooperated with, collaborated with injustice and ignored the demands of righteousness, John was a threat to their rule and way of life.

Jesus would also be viewed as a threat, and, like John, Jesus would be executed, put to death in an attempt to silence him. But first, Jesus would call his disciples and form a community in which the kingdom of God was both proclaimed as a future possibility and was emerging in their very midst. A community that continues to this day.

I heard part of an interview with a former neo-nazi on the radio show, Fresh Air.² Christian Picciolini described how he was an angry, bullied boy. He was recruited into a violent, white-power skinhead group and was groomed for leadership. Now he is articulate, remorseful, and working to help others leave those gangs and their ideology behind. Looking back on why he was drawn in, he said that people in general, but teenagers especially, are looking for identity, community and purpose. He found those things in the white supremacist skinhead movement – and he now is spending his life trying to help others find those essential things in healthier better ways.

Out in the wilderness, those who came to hear the prophet John, found just that. They claimed their identity as people who belonged to God, they gathered at the river with others seeking a new way of life, and they found themselves passionate in their purpose.

The powerful thought that they could put an end to the message of the prophet. They thought that if they could kill John, God's challenge would be over and things could go back to business as usual. But truth cannot be denied forever and will rise up. The powerful thought they could bring Jesus down, could arrest him and try him and execute him, but the gospel message says that the powers of love and goodness are greater even than the power of death.

Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. And those who would follow in the pursuit of God's goodness and justice still engage in that watery ritual. To get cleansed. Shocked by the water. To make promises of repentance. To resist evil and follow in the ways of goodness. To form a community of faith in which we learn that we are important, needed, loved. That we have a role to play in helping others, and helping ourselves, live out our own calls from God.

And through the pages of Scripture, and through the words of hymns, and in the silent spaces in prayers, we might hear those same words that Jesus heard as he was baptized, "this is my child, my beloved. With you I am well-pleased."

May it be so, among us, even through us. Now and always. Amen.

¹ They are also available on Amazon.com. https://www.amazon.com/Crick-ettes-Sampler-Cheese-Vinegar-Hotlix/dp/B005HBTNH8/ref=sr_1_1_s_it?s=grocery&ie=UTF8&qid=1517089744&sr=1-1&keywords=crickets

² "A Former Neo-Nazi Explains Why Hate Drew Him In – And How He Got Out," originally aired on 18 January, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/01/18/578745514/a-former-neo-nazi-explains-why-hate-drew-him-in-and-how-he-got-out>.