Mark 1: 1-8 – A Voice Crying Out in the Wilderness

 John the Baptists is truly one of the great, colourful figures of the bible. With his camel hair robe, wild hair, and a great giant beard, with some leftover bits of honey and locus still stuck in it. Our image of him is an image fit for movies and Sunday school. When we tell this story, John is the one crying out, preparing the way for the birth of Jesus. . . long ago, and safely far away, or perhaps safely on the colouring sheet of children. The problems is that when we limit John to this Sunday School image, what we have done is strip him of his power. For John is also a metaphor. He is a metaphor that can open us to seeing how God is at work today preparing us, for the birth of Christ within our life and within our souls.

When the bible was being put together, Origen along with other Christians, understood scripture as having three uses. One use was called the literal use of scripture, by literal they did not mean word for word infallible, but rather more like literature – this is the level of the story. As a story, it is about what happened, or perhaps is one of those great stories that we just love to tell. Origen call this the level of the flesh. This is how we often read about John The Baptist, as an ancient story about a prophet who lived long ago. At the other end of the spectrum is the allegorical use of scripture, which Origen called the level of the Spirit. This is how scripture speaks to us about God, it is the mystical sense of scripture. In between these uses, there is the moral use of scripture, by which I don’t mean just moralistic, or ethical, but rather it is how scripture is about us, about our life, our hearts, our spiritual life, - Origen captured this well when he called it the level of the soul. At this level the characters, the stories, of scripture, become metaphors for how God interacts and works within our soul, our lives and our world today. This is how I want us to explore John the Baptist today.

To explore this soul or moral level of scripture we must begin with the literal – the story of John. So, who is John the Baptist within the story of scripture. He is of course the one who is calling, calling out to people to prepare the way for the coming of Christ. In the story of the Church year he is the one who is preparing us for the Birth of Christ.

So what does this mean when we move to the level of how Scripture speak of our soul and our spiritual life. At this level the birth of Christ represents something different then just the historical birth of Christ. At this level Mary represents us, humanity and our souls. The birth of Jesus is then the story of how the Word of God is formed within us, and is birthed through us into the world. The mystic Myster Eckhard described this as the Birth of the Word in the soul, or perhaps you know this as the gift or stirring up of the Holy spirit. From this perspective who is John? John the Baptist represents how God calls us, how God sends messengers into our life, into our world and into our soul to prepare us for a new life, a new revelation, an renewed presence of God with in our life.

To ground this in your own lives, I would invite you for a moment to prayerfully reflect for a moment on your own life. Has God ever, or perhaps is God now calling your, or preparing you to encounter God in a new way. . . . If you don’t know what to look for, sometimes it can take the form of desire in your heart for a closer relationships with God, or it can be a person or an event that challenges the way you think or live so that you might return to the ways of God in a new and deeper way. . . . This is what we John represents.

Lets go a little deeper. Who is John the Baptist? John is a very interesting character. He is the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, both of whom not only come from priestly families, but Elizabeth is a descendent of Aaron, the original priest of Isarael. John come from a family that is deeply apart of the established religious structures. In fact the prediction of John’s birth, happened while his father was serving as a priest, brining incense into the sanctuary in Jerusalem, into the place that was understood as being where God dwells on earth, into the place that was the heart of the religious life of in Israel. So, by the traditions of the time, we should find John, likewise as a priest, apart of the religious establishment, serving and sharing his message in the Temple, when was his turn.

That is not where we find John. He is in the wilderness. He is not in priestly robes, he is wearing camel heir, he is not eating the left overs of the sacrifices, but locus and honey, he is not safely behind the walls of Jerusalem, but rather in a place scorched by heat, in which lions and bears and bandits might attack. His way of life, his location, his message and the crowds that come to him are all challenges the priestly and temple structure, while a baptism for the forgiveness of sins is a direct challenge to the temple system of sacrificing animals for the forgiveness of Sins. To understand the tension in the text, imagine the son of a husband and wife who were the president and vice president of an oil company and their son has gone off, and is not only living of the grid, but is leading a movement that is shutting down piplines and calling on people to get off oil. This is what John represents.

John the Baptist represents how God calls us and prepares us by challenging the way we live, including the ways we worship and understand God. Why is this important? All of us develop our own religious systems, our ways of understanding God, and understanding life, that become established within us, in the patterns of our life, in the patterns of our thoughts, our hearts, and in our shared patterns that we develop as a church. The problems is that even the most exquisite systems of understanding and relating to God cannot contain the fullness of God, just as a map of the Rockies cannot contain the grandeur of the Rockies. Or as the Great, Thomas Aquinas recognized, that compared to one encounter with God, all of even his grand system of theology, is but straw.

This is why when we are being prepared to encounter and experience God in a new way, When we are being prepared for the birth of the Word of God within us, there is almost always a challenge to the ways that we currently understand and think about God, about our lives, our religion and the world. Sometimes this can be as subtle,as a yearning within your heart, or as simple as a person or a situation that challenges us, that irritates us, that points out our inconsistency or who disturbs our heart. Often it is more dramatic and God prepares us by shaking apart the establishment of our life, we become sick, we loose a job, we face failure, a loved one dies or perhaps we begin to die.

Once again to root this in your life I would invite you to prayerfully reflect on your own experience. How has God challenged you to expand your heart, your consciousness or your faith in God. What have been the voices crying out in the wilderness for you? How are you today being invited to respond, to prepare yourself for something new?

From what I understand, you as a congregation have taken the very courageous move of intentionally seeking out these wilderness voices, and calling a pastors who’s very job it is to be outside your established ways of functioning, and to discover the people who are not within the church, who are challenging the church who are crying out. This is courageous and I pray you do not fail in your courage.

Why do I speak about and pray for courage? John the Baptist, the wild many of the wilderness, also represents, the wild dynamism of God, and with this dynamism we must face the possibility of God shaking up our comfortable world. For most of us our reaction this wildness, is to back away into our safety. We react by dismissing the voices that are challenging us, by closing down our hearts, by drugging our self to push away the disquiet or by becoming angry. There is no greater human tragedy then this. When God sends us what John the Baptist is a metaphor for, God is at work, preparing the way for a great gift of new life, a gift of profound joy, the Gift of God’s own self and our natural tendency is to say no, to defend our self, before we receive the gift that is given. When this happens it is like the death of a child. The death of the possibility of a full life, before that life has had the chance to grow into its fullness.

So be of good courage, when you encounter John the Baptist in your life. For God is preparing your for a new birth. The struggle that will come is worth it. Just as the hard process, the long struggle, the great pain and suffering of caring for and brining a new child into our world is worth it? Why, because it is life. John baptises in water, which is a symbol of birth. Repentance, that John proclaims is the invitation to turn back to God. Forgiveness, is the washing away of the mess, so that we can again reclaim the essence of our life, and again be reborn as our true identity, children of God. John the Baptist, is the Metaphore for how God prepares us to be born anew, alive to receive the Gift of Jesus, which is the Holy Spirit, which is of course God’s own life, living within us and through us.

What God intends for us is a life far more profound then what most of us settle for. We are intended for lives in which the Word of God is born within our soul, so that God’ very self might live within us and through for the healing of the world.

Again and again in our lives, God sends us John the Baptiser, messengers that call us back to God, that prepare us by expanding our heart so that Christ might be born in a new way in our lives. May we hear these voices, may our hearts be turned and may we have the faith to receive the gift that is given.

Amen