

“An Announcement from the Wilderness”

Dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. There's a story told about a pastor who, one week, was invited to preach at a nearby country church he had never been to before. They didn't have a pastor, so he agreed (on that particular Sunday) to fill in. As he set out that morning, he wasn't quite sure which road to take, so he stopped to ask for directions. The person he talked to told him how to get there, but mistakenly steered him down the wrong road.

As he drove, it took a bit longer than he had expected, but he continued until he finally reached a little white church, walking in to the service just as the children's message (led by one of the parishioners) was concluding. As a result, (knowing he was late), he went straight to the pulpit and delivered (what turned out to be) quite an inspiring sermon. The people in the congregation weren't quite sure what to think, (not expecting him to be there), but they appreciated the fact that he was. When the worship was over, the pastor shook hands, said his goodbyes, and headed home.

Meanwhile, there was another small church a few miles away, filled with people still waiting and wondering what possibly could have happened to the pastor who was scheduled to preach. Our hero never suspected, that morning, that he had gone to the wrong church.

Have you ever noticed that, how sometimes in life things don't play out the way we had thought they would? Things that surprise us? Things we don't expect? Times when what actually happens is not what we had thought would happen? Unexpected guests?

In the church, (if you think about it), Advent is one of those times. Everywhere we go (these days) there are signs that Christmas is soon to be upon us. Decorations, brightly lights, carols playing in the background, it all seems to fit. And then we come to church, on this Second Sunday of Advent, some of the same decorations and music, and yet we find ourselves staring face-to-face with a man named John.

Have you ever wondered why there are no Christmas cards with John the Baptist on the front? (I mean, really?) You'll find Wise Men, and Angels, a manger scene, a star, maybe even some shepherds, but for some reason, you'll never find one with John. How come?

It's interesting, in the gospels, how each one starts in a different way. Matthew begins with a genealogy, a listing of Jesus' ancestors, going back through the reign of King David, all the way to Abraham. He tells about Mary and Joseph and the announcement by an angel that Mary will conceive a child by the Holy Spirit. Matthew then goes on to tell about how the Wise Men followed a star until they found Jesus. It's a beautiful start to the story.

Luke tells it in a different way. He begins with the angel's announcement to Zechariah and Elizabeth, (John the Baptist's parents), that a son will be born to them in their advanced age. Luke then tells about the angel's announcement to Mary that she too will bear a child, the Son of God, who will save his people from their sin. From there, it's the Magnificat, a multitude of angels praising God in the heavens, and a group of shepherds hurrying to Bethlehem to worship the newborn babe.

The Gospel of John is totally different. Written much later than the other three, instead of starting with Jesus' ancestry or the story of Jesus' birth, John goes all the way back to the beginning of time to let us know that Christ was present even as the world was being created.

And then there's the gospel of Mark. The first of the four gospels to be recorded, many believe that Mark wrote his gospel, in part, out of a concern that those who were witnesses to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection would all die before anyone prepared a written testimony. So Mark wrote one: a bare-bones account of the things that were essential.

As a result, in Mark's account there are no shepherds, no magi. Neither are there any theological reflections, as in John, about who Jesus was before he became one of us. Instead, Mark starts where it all started, with Jesus' baptism, and with the ministry of the one who was called and chosen to prepare the way.

Mark's gospel begins like this: "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way.'" Mark tells us that "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to see him. Confessing their sins (he says), they were baptized in the Jordan River...And this was his message: 'After me comes one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'"

Our introduction to the coming of Christ in Mark's Gospel is so much different than the other three. It isn't angels singing in the heavens or a bright star moving toward Bethlehem. It's an announcement. It's John the Baptist, out in the wilderness, with a message (from God) that he wants the world to hear.

One of the classes I took in seminary was taught by Dr. Thomas Long. Dr. Long told a story about what happened in his first parish. It was time for the sermon. He was getting ready to preach. Suddenly a man in the balcony, a stranger, (nobody knew him), stood up and said in a clear loud voice, "I have a word from the Lord."

He said it was one of the situations he wished (looking back) he could relive. (He said), Heads swiveled around. Everyone was caught off guard. Whatever this word from the Lord was, no one ever got to hear it because "two bouncers disguised as ushers" quickly moved into the balcony and politely ushered this man out. He said it was a Sunday morning to remember.

Now, I'm not surprised the ushers led that man out. I would imagine (and expect) our ushers (if it were to happen here) to do the same. There's a time and a place for everything, and in the middle of a planned worship, it's not the time, nor the place.

Our first thought (would be) that he was a nut. But what if he wasn't? What if he actually had a word from God; had something to say? Would we listen? Would we give his message a chance?

John the Baptist was a bit crazy. At least he must have appeared to be, to many. But many came to hear him anyway. Crazy or not, he carried a genuine announcement from God.

Church announcements are not usually the highlight of the service. (Maybe you've noticed that.) We put them at the beginning, they need to happen. We even print some in the bulletin, but they're not the focus, unless of course they get misprinted. One church had a typo in their bulletin. (It said), "Choir rehearsal is on Thursday at 7:00 pm. Anyone who wishes to sin in the choir must come to practice."

I seriously doubt there is more sinning in the choir than anywhere else. And we certainly don't need to practice. You have to be careful about announcements.

At one small college in the Northeast, it had been snowing for hours when an announcement came over the intercom: "Will the students who are parked on College Drive please move their cars so we can begin plowing?"

Twenty minutes later there was another announcement: "Plowing has been completed. The 327 students who left class to move the 6 cars on College Drive can now return to class."

John the Baptist is out in the wilderness. Strangely dressed, locusts and wild honey, a bit crazy; all he's doing is making an announcement. He has a word from God. He has a message the world needs to hear.

I hope you know that. That's all this is. The Christian faith isn't something we need to figure out and decide for ourselves if it makes sense. It's not a religion we sort through and discover. It's not an idea we're called to think about and debate. It's not a discussion. The Christian faith is an announcement. It's a proclamation. It's a revelation, on behalf of God himself, of who he is and what he is planning to do.

All of the stories leading up to the birth of Jesus are filled with announcements. That's all they are. In Luke's gospel, it's an announcement to Elizabeth and Zechariah that she will give birth to a child in her old age; and it happens. This wasn't an offer, a possibility, not even a question. It was an announcement. It was a declaration from God.

In Matthew's gospel, an announcement is made to Mary (by an angel) and then confirmed in a dream to Joseph, that Mary (his fiancée) would also bear a child; one that would save the world. It's not a question up for debate. It wasn't for Mary and Joseph to decide. It had already been decided. It was determined long before; and not by them, but by God.

In John's gospel, it's no different. He goes back to the start, to where it all started. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us."

In Mark's gospel, it's the same thing. That's all this season is. It's a season of announcements. It's a season of God declaring to us what he has done and is promising to do. And he's doing it through his Son, Jesus. He's done it through the person and work of Christ.

That's what John is saying. That was his announcement. "After me (he says) comes one more powerful than I...I baptize you with water (he says), but (when he comes), the one sent from God, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

This season of Advent, that's what it's about. It's not a matter of whether or not it's true. (It is true.) It's not a debate. It's not a question. It's already been announced. The question is, "What are you going to do with the announcement?" What are you going to do with what God has already done and is doing?" That's the question.

Not long ago, I read about a clockmaker in Switzerland who owned a large and expensive clock. (The story said), it was one of a kind. It was a masterpiece. It was so beautiful that he had it displayed in the storefront window of his shop. Everyone who passed by would not only look at the clock and marvel, but they'd set their watches by it. It was an amazing clock.

The trouble was that it was not as accurate (in keeping time) as it was beautiful. Every day it would fail to keep the right time. So every day, the clockmaker would come in early and reset the hands to the right time. Every morning he would get up and make the adjustments to make sure the time on the clock was right.

The story said this went on for years, until one day one of his employees made a suggestion. He said, "Instead of spending your time (each day) adjusting the clock's hands, why don't you take the time you need and fix its inner parts?" (Go after the problem.) And that's what he did and from that day on it worked.

Now, this is different, but that was John's message to the people. "Confess your sin. Repent and make things right." That's John's message to us. "Stop adjusting the hands." Stop trying each day to make it work. You can't do it. You'll never get it right.

But I have an announcement (John says). I know the one who can. His name is Jesus. He came for you. It's time to listen (to him), to confess your sin, to repent of the things you've done, and to let God begin to do (in your life) what only God can do in your life.

I don't know how many of you have ever been to northern Minnesota, to Lake Itasca. It's a beautiful setting, a number of surrounding lakes; 20 miles north of Park Rapids and 30 miles south of Bemidji.

What's most notable about Lake Itasca is it's where the Mississippi River begins. It's nothing more than a tiny little stream where it starts. If you go to the right place, you can actually step across.

It's incredible when you think about it; how, from nothing more than a trickle of water flowing out of this one lake, how the river travels (before it's finished) a total of 2,348 miles until it finally pours into the Gulf of Mexico. Along the way, the Mississippi drains 33 states and its watershed covers more than one-half of the entire country. It fosters cities and commerce, transports people and goods, provides habitat for fish, plants, and wildlife, and enriches human life with natural recreational opportunities. All from one almost seemingly insignificant start.

Now, why do I share that bit of geographical trivia with you today? I share it for two reasons; one, because that's exactly what's happening at the beginning of Mark's gospel with John. It's a simple start: out in the wilderness, a man in strange clothing, a few locusts, some people coming to see and to hear what he had to say, and an announcement of something that's about to happen; an announcement of someone who's about to appear.

Little did the world know that the something about to happen would change the world. Little did the world know that the someone about to appear was God himself; and all from a small start, an event and a person that no one would have thought.

The second has to do with you. It has to do with what you do with what John announced. You heard what he said. It's not up for debate. It's not a question. It's not a discussion, for you and for me to figure out. It's an announcement. It's a proclamation. It's a revelation, on behalf of God himself, of who he is and what he is planning to do.

The question is what will you do with what God is doing? How will you respond to what he has already done? It might not seem like much. A confession of sin? A recognition that you and I do not have what it takes? But he does, and he will (take our confession), that little start, and turn it into something big.

My friends, Jesus is coming. It has been announced. What you now do with what God is doing is up to you. Let's pray.

Gracious God, we thank you for the work you have done, and for the way in which your saving action and plan are not up for debate. We ask that these weeks leading up to Christmas would be ones in which you would work in us, to help us see our sin, to enable us to recognize our need, and to empower us to respond in faith to the announcement you've made for us in Jesus...in whose name we pray. Amen.