

Mark 1: 1-8
Creekside COB
December 4, 2005

The God We Are Waiting For
The Word in the Wilderness God

You won't find him in a Nativity scene. No one will play his part in an elementary school Christmas pageant. You'll not see him on a Christmas card. There is no mention of him in our favorite Christmas carols. He won't be ringing the bell by the Salvation Army kettle and he won't show up at your door caroling. He isn't the kind of character you can easily warm-up to, and you probably aren't the sort of people he would warm up to.

He was a thin, weathered, and wiry man who couldn't speak softer than a shout. He wore the same suit to work everyday—camel hair. He carried his lunch, and it was always the same—locusts and honey. His hair looked like it had never been cut or combed. His matted, tangled beard grew to his chest. He looked more like a cave man than a prophet. But Mark knew he was a bonafide prophet—the first one Israel had seen in over three hundred years. It is John the Baptist, not Jesus who appears first in Mark's gospel.

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”
This is the only place in the Bible where the word *gospel* appears. “ Good news. That's what *gospel* means. Worship in December is so special because we retell the wondrous story of Jesus' birth and recount the reasons why his birth is such good news.

We love Matthew and Luke's account of Jesus' humble birth. But Mark doesn't begin with Jesus' birth. Mark doesn't have a birth story. Maybe he hadn't heard it. Maybe he had, but didn't include it. Maybe he thought it wasn't important in the bigger picture of Jesus' life. We don't know why he didn't mention it. We only know that Mark begins with John the Baptist, not Jesus.

John was to Jesus what *Ed McMahon* was to *Johnny Carson*. He was the front man who prepared people for the star. He was the messenger that Isaiah had foretold. He was a road grader, straightening out the crooked road and making it smooth for Jesus when his time finally came. John had one sermon that he preached over and over, but it never lost its power. The subject was simple, but the prescription wasn't. It demanded repentance and forgiveness—dying in the cold Jordan River and coming out a shivering a new person awaiting marching orders from a new commander-in-chief.

I wouldn't go across the street to hear him. If you hear one hell-fire-and-damnation preacher, and you've heard them all. Who wants to hear something like this just weeks before Christmas? If I want verbal abuse I'll call-in to the Rush Limbaugh Show and call him a pompous, ideological jerk.

I wouldn't go to hear John, and neither would you. We've progressed beyond groveling before God. There are those who need repentance, but we're educated, well-adjusted people. Our heads are on straight. We're in the ninetieth percentile on the goodness index. Our envelopes go into the offering plate each Sunday. We contribute to the building project, and are always generous with canned goods for Church Community Services. Repentance is well suited... for the needs of our neighbors.

The folks in Jerusalem felt the same. Spiritual resources were at their doorsteps... the Temple, the priests, the rabbis, and the accumulated wisdom of Judaism. Jerusalem had it all-- except for one thing, and for that "one thing" people left the spiritual epicenter of the world. I wouldn't go across the street to hear John, but they trekked across a desolate wilderness to a fiery, wiry preacher. What led people to leave the settled security of the city and head for the hills where they could be bitten by cobras, mauled by lions, or mugged by bandits?

The name, LeRoy Jenkins may not mean anything to you He was Ohio's version of Oral Roberts. He wore white suits and had a pompadour hairstyle that took a tube of Brylcreme and a can of

sealing wax to hold in place. He had healing crusades. When the services were over, there were used crutches and wheelchairs left on stage by people who didn't need them anymore. Some thought he was sent straight from God. Many thought he was a shyster-- a cross between Elmer Gantry and Jim Baaker. He did good, and ended up doing well. The healing circuit was lucrative for LeRoy... too lucrative. He spent time in prison for embezzlement and tax evasion.

When LeRoy came to my hometown, I went with a group of guys to see him at the Veteran's Memorial Coliseum. We were thoroughly skeptical, but thought it would be a hoot. He worked the crowd with his sermon, then the healing line formed. One of our friends who we affectionately named, "Gut," said, "Watch this!" We didn't know where he was going. A couple minutes we almost fell out of the mezzanine seats. Gut was on the stage! He had pulled some impressive stunts, but this topped them all.

Gut's recollection of what happened was fuzzy. He knew LeRoy was a huckster. He feigned an infirmity, and the last thing he remembered was LeRoy saying, *"I know why you're here, son. The Holy Spirit has something for you."* The next thing he knew he was laying on his back looking up at the rafters! On the way home he didn't say much. Neither did we. We talked about "other" things.

Not everyone who hiked to the banks of the Jordan believed. The Religion Police were at the edge of the crowd saying, "He doesn't have a permit to do this. We haven't sanctioned it. He's not degreed or credentialed." They were too busy flipping through their Policies and Procedures Manual that they missed the obvious. People who wouldn't dare set foot in the Temple's inner precincts-- women, children, sinners, and the unclean—they couldn't wait for John to shove them under. And Temple worship didn't draw crowds like this.

People were hungry for what temple religion hadn't given them. Back in Jerusalem, God's Spirit was buried under the accumulation of smoke, bloody sacrifices, offerings, Temple taxes, ritual, law, and priestly mumbo-jumbo. Rather than slough

all of it off and start all over in the city, God's Spirit went with the John the Baptist into the wild to do a new thing and prepare the way for Someone who was coming.

If you've been in the wilderness, you know that it can sharpen your awareness. You don't hear the things that normally distract you, so you are able to hear, "other things." The clock is useless. Everything slows down. You know beauty when you see it. At night, staring at the canopy of stars, you realize that the things you think matter, don't; and things you assume are important, aren't; and things you hope will make you happy, won't. The parts of you that hide from you speak up in the wild saying, "You can run, but you cannot hide."

God had a hard time getting through all the accumulated layers of ritual and rules that "tamed" his love. The remedy called for more than peeling back the layers. It called for more than tinkering with what they already had. God started all over from scratch, out in the wilderness, through a wild man with fire in his bones. "A bigger man than me is coming, and I'm not qualified to untie his shoes. Take a long, hard look at your insides. Dig down beneath who you think you are until you get to who you really are. You're in no shape to meet him when he comes. Come down into this cold water and wash up. I can't tell you his name, but I know he's coming to save sinners."

When you go into the wilderness you can't take a lot with you. You must strip down to the bare essentials. Dan Petry's family lived in Nigeria several years when his parents, Kaydo and Margie, were missionaries. Kaydo tells the story of helping with a baptismal service in the bush. It was the dry season, and the river in which they would do the baptisms had withered to a small channel through which the water rushed with considerable force.

Kaydo was downstream from where another missionary performed the baptisms. As he dunked a small woman under the third time, he lost his grip. She was quickly swept down the river where Kaydo grabbed her before got away. She apparently thought that what happened was part of the service.

I like the symbolism. The cleansing waters of baptism carry us from where we are to where God wants us. When we get out of Jerusalem, or Elkhart, we're swept away from all the clutter, conflict, confusion, and craziness, and into the wilderness, where we see what matters. It isn't about Christmas shopping, Christmas lights, Christmas cards, Christmas cookies, Christmas parties, or the Christmas goose. It isn't about anything that you can build an industry around.

We come to church on the second Sunday of Advent and we don't get baby Jesus—not yet. We get the guy no one wants on a Christmas card. We get John, screaming his lungs out, telling us to prepare; telling us to get back to what matters, which is Jesus, his love, and each other.

Jesus wasn't born in Jerusalem, the big city. He was born in the little town of Bethlehem out in the hill country.

As I working on this message I was aware of a song going on in my head. It was just the melody. I didn't pay attention to it, but the tune wouldn't stop, so I spent some time with it and the words started to come. It wasn't a song for Advent, but the words say otherwise. See if you remember it. It was sung by Mama Cass Elliot:

**There's a new world coming,
And it's just around the bend.
There's a new world coming,
This one's coming to an end.**

**There's a new voice calling,
You can hear it if you try.
And it's growing stronger
With each day that's passing by.**

**There's a brand new morning,
Running clear and sweet and free.
There's a new day dawning,
That belongs to you and me.**

**There's a new world coming,
One that we've had visions of.
Coming in peace, coming in joy, coming in love.**