

Sermon, December 6, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome back our good friends Dr. Tom Johnson and Mike Broderick, from Marsh Mountain Consort; along with Alice Fleischman and Mike, from Aurora Celtic, —two of our favorite groups, who are providing special music. I can't wait! We are still waiting for a safe time to resume public worship. New pandemic cases, hospitalizations and deaths are at record highs. But there is some promising news today.

When we shut down public worship last March, we all hoped it would be for only a few weeks. As the virus spread, it became obvious it could be a matter of months, and some warned it could be years before it would be safe to gather indoors again. Today it may well again be only a matter of weeks, as mass vaccinations are expected to begin soon. WE have been through many rough months. We can handle a few more weeks. But in the meantime we must be vigilant about wearing masks in public, hand washing, maintaining social distancing and avoiding indoor gatherings until we are protected.

At this point I know many people and families who have had the disease. Some friends nearly died from it, and one friend died from it, just last week. So let's be safe. And cautious. And thanks be to God, finally, let us be hopeful again.

Meanwhile, if you want to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com. You can also donate through our Facebook page.

Now today's stupid joke.

I asked a friend how his Christmas shopping is going, and he said “I’m not doing any shopping this year.”

I said, “Really? Not even something for your lovely wife?” And he said, “No.” He said when he asked her what she wanted for Christmas, she said, “Nothing would make me happier than a diamond necklace.” So he says he’s getting her nothing. So she can be happier. We’ll see how that works out...

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming, give us strength in our conflicts and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

A reading from Isaiah, the fortieth chapter.

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower

fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Mark, the first chapter.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me;

I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Maybe instead of Advent we should call these next couple of weeks “John the Baptist” season. Because for both the second and third Sundays of Advent he’s the headliner in our gospel readings every year. He’ll be back just after Christmas too, when we commemorate the Baptism of Jesus. The Baptist normally shows up again at least once in the spring as well.

By my calculations, I have researched, written and preached probably seventy different sermons on John, dating back to Internship. Not to brag, but I figure by now, I probably know just about all there is to know about him, even though I still don’t really understand why or how he became such a big part of the Jesus story.

John is variously described as the “forerunner” or “precursor” of Jesus. Not clear on why that was necessary. Some refer to him as “the prophet” or specifically “Elijah” even though in the gospel of John he distinctly says, “No I’m not.” John himself apparently didn’t think he was such a big deal, since today he freely admitted he was unworthy of even untying Jesus’ sandal straps. That is a task a slave would normally perform for his master.

Kind of makes you wonder why the Orthodox Churches rank John number two in their hierarchy of saints, ahead of Peter and Paul and Mary Magdalene and just behind Mother Mary. And why the Catholic Church also considers John uniquely special. Martyred saints are nearly always commemorated by the Church on the date they died. But not John. Catholics consider John to have been infused with God’s Grace prenatally, so unlike anybody else except Jesus, the Catholic Church celebrates John’s birthday in June in addition to his supposed date of death in August.

You might be surprised to learn that other religions honor John too. Islam considers him a great prophet. The Qu'ran describes him as "pure," "devout," "dutiful towards his parents" and "neither arrogant nor rebellious." It goes on to call John, or in Arabic Yahya, "The Prophet of the Righteous." I know I've told you about the 70 thousand Mandaeans in the world who still believe today that John the Baptist WAS the Messiah, and that Jesus was just a John wanna-be.

When Joseph Smith started the Mormons, he claimed he was visited by John, who conferred on him the official priestly authority of Aaron. Which is kind of odd, considering John himself chose never to be a priest.

The Unification Church—AKA—the Moonies, on the other hand, consider John the greatest disappointment of Jesus' earthly ministry. They say that even though they were close, John never became one of Jesus' dedicated followers like he should have.

The Bible really doesn't tell us a whole lot about John. Luke says more than anyone, including the fact that John and Jesus were somehow related through their mothers. John's parents both carried priestly pedigrees. According to Luke, Elizabeth was a direct descendant of Aaron, making her part of the highly esteemed Kohanim, or priestly class. John's father was also a temple priest.

In fact, according to Jewish tradition, John should have been named Bar Zecharia, the equivalent of Zechariah, Junior to honor his father. And as firstborn son he should ALSO have been a priest. Instead, according to Luke, John chose to go nowhere near the Jerusalem Temple where he should have worked, choosing instead to live and preach out in the wilderness, staying away from the city completely.

Heck the way Luke tells it, it sounds like John ran away from home and the religious establishment to start a wilderness communal cult on his own. But a growing number of New Testament scholars these days

think he instead ran away not so much to START a wilderness communal cult. But to join one that already existed.

They're talking about the Essenes, who had been around since the early second century BCE. In Jesus' day, the Essenes were one of three known sects of Judaism, along with the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

The largely wealthy Sadducees were the political and religious elite of Judean society. The Pharisees, were more a grassroots tea-party type populist group. The realm of the Sadducees was the Temple. For the Pharisees it was the Synagogue. The Essenes on the other hand, chose to have nothing to do with either.

Unlike the other sects of Judaism, the Essenes didn't drink wine or strong spirits. According to Luke, neither did John. The Essenes didn't marry. Neither did John. Many members of the Essene communities were vegetarian, although some would eat fish and insects, especially locusts. Ditto John. And for the Essenes, ritual water cleansing was part of their daily routine for spiritual renewal. Much like the Baptism of John.

For the most part the Essenes steered clear of urban areas, the Temple and synagogues, like John. Mostly because they found them to be corrupted by politics and bad leadership. Take for example the Herods--the so-called Jewish Kings and Tetrarchs who really weren't even Jewish. Their conversions to the faith were matters of expedience in order to secure various political appointments from Rome.

The Herods were despised by the Essenes for flagrantly violating Jewish laws, especially those pertaining to marriage, divorce and taking a life. Pointing that out publicly was exactly what got John the Baptist beheaded.

You might think you don't know much about the Essenes, but I bet you do. Because seventy-three years ago archaeologists discovered their

extensive library stored in eleven caves near an ancient settlement called Qumran in the West Bank. That library, consisting of nearly a thousand manuscripts, soon became known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Robert Feather is a member of the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

He's also a member of the prestigious Society of Biblical Literature. His 2005 Book, titled "The Secret Initiation of Jesus at Qumran:" and subtitled "The Essene Mysteries of John the Baptist," is a highly acclaimed academic work, and a favorite of New Testament scholars.

Dr. Feather says careful study of the scrolls has helped clear up many of the mysteries of the New Testament world, providing important background information that's otherwise missing from the Bible itself. Feather is all but certain John the Baptist spent a considerable amount of time with the Essenes.

That would explain his unusual clothing and diet, his anti-establishment faith and politics and of course those water-cleansing rituals. Feather thinks Jesus probably spent some time with them too. Which might explain why very little is known about his early years. It also might explain why Jesus was so much more educated than one might expect for a Galilean artisan-class Jew. Because despite their choice to live out in the sticks, the Essenes were very academically-oriented and highly educated.

Of course there's no proven connection between Jesus and the Essenes. At least not yet.

Their writings do refer to an unnamed Messianic-figure known as the "Righteous Teacher." But current research points toward the timing being all wrong for their Righteous Teacher to have been Jesus. Maybe instead Jesus just learned a little more from his precursor-forerunner-mentor-prophet-cousin, than we realize.

That would certainly help to explain the amazing similarities between John and Jesus—you know—like how they both were announced by angels and conceived through special acts of God.

And how both called for repentance in their preaching, promising God's forgiveness; and the imminent Kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven. Both John and Jesus also practiced and advocated Baptism. And had closely-knit inner-circles of disciples as well as many dedicated followers whose numbers increased especially after their deaths at the hands of political authorities.

Of course, they had their differences too. As I mentioned, despite an impressive priestly pedigree, John totally avoided the Temple of the Sadducees and the synagogues of the Pharisees. Jesus on the other hand lacked religious credentials. (I mean other than the fact that his father was God.) And while he had an occasional dust-up with Pharisees too, Jesus always seemed willing to sit down and discuss their differences with them over a nice dinner.

If you wanted to see John, you had to go out into the wilderness and find him. Jesus instead tended to find the people where they were, in their cities and towns; in their fields with their flocks; in their own homes, the streets, and even the Temple and synagogues. And for two guys who were supposedly so close, I find it especially ironic that the gospels present Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of the very faith that John wanted no part of.

With axes and winnowing forks and an unquenchable fire for unrepentant sinners, there was plenty to fear in the coming kingdom described by John.

Meanwhile Jesus' sermons on the Kingdom were the type you might expect from a warm and fuzzy preacher during the season of Advent. Jesus often spoke of a kind and forgiving God, who is loving parent to us all. His sermons were full of the traditional Advent themes of hope, love, joy and peace.

Well what do you know. Sermon number—what—seventy-one? And I STILL learned a few new things about John the Baptist this time around. Funny how that seems to happen every Advent--the season set aside for us to prepare for the coming of Christ.

A few weeks ago, we read where Paul told the Thessalonians that returning Jesus will appear triumphantly in the sky and meet us in the clouds, with angels and trumpets and much celebration. Yeah, well, maybe someday. But in the meantime I think we are more likely to run into the Jesus who is a little more down to earth than that; showing up in the same kinds of places, with the same sorts of people, he chose to hang out with in his first coming.

In the back alleys, fields and stables, with the homeless and hungry. With sinners and street people; sick and lonely strangers. With the dying and their families, friends and neighbors who mourn. Today if you're looking for Jesus, I would look among orphans and addicts, outcasts and the marginalized. In refugee camps and ghettos; hospitals, nursing homes, prisons and The Projects.

Because it seems that's still the Jesus we need, and the one I'm hoping and praying for again this Christmas. Because despite John's best efforts, this world is still a very messy place. Where the mountains are high and the valleys low, and the paths we walk are almost never smooth and rarely straight.

Amen.
