

John the Baptist – The Holy Homemaker

Mark 1:1-8

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As you know, I am not a preacher who enjoys putting titles with my sermons. I have, of course, several reasons as to my distaste for sermon titles. First, I don't like cutesy little things that make the powerfully good and often challenging message of the Gospel sound all cuddly and saccharine. Second, I don't like to tell you what you are supposed to hear as the sermon is preached. When you and I are in the preaching moment and open to God's Spirit, then only God knows what you might hear. Even though I am the only one talking, you and I are collaborating with the Spirit as to what will happen with these words between my mouth and our ears. And, finally, I must admit that the last reason is that I usually don't know on Tuesday, the bulletin deadline, exactly what I am going to write on Friday morning when the sermon takes shape.

"John the Baptist—the Holy Homemaker." I know! It breaks all of my rules. It is kind of cutesy. It tells you what you are to listen for. And, it definitely makes me focus on one particular aspect of a very rich and theologically complex text. And yet, I also suspect that none of you has ever attached those words – the Holy Homemaker – to John the Baptist before.

I mean, really. Look at him! He is standing right over here on the mantle behind our Lord's Table.¹ Okay – so it is really our Joseph figure that we dress like John the Baptist—but you still get my point. He does not look like one who would do a good job of making a house feel like a home, does he. He does not appear to have hospitality as one of his spiritual gifts.

Listen again to Mark's description. "Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey." John the Baptist is dressed in the clothing of Elijah the prophet, not June Cleaver. Fred Buechner describes John this way: "John the Baptist didn't fool around. He lived in the wilderness around the Dead Sea. He subsisted on a starvation diet, and so did his disciples. He wore clothes that even the rummage sale people wouldn't have handled. When he preached, it was fire and brimstone every time."²

The image of John the Baptist that Mark paints, as well as Luke, and on which Buechner reflects, is an image of a stark, wild-man street preacher, bellowing out messages to be baptized. Bellowing out calls for repentance. Bellowing out that the powerful one-- the one wearing the sandals John was not even fit to untie-- *that* one was on the way, so you better be ready. John the Baptist has been called the Rottweiler for the Gospel because he sinks his teeth into us, shakes our souls around, and will not let us go. Again – the title "homemaker" does NOT seem to fit very well with this John the Baptist character.

And yet, John is calling us to prepare our home in order to be ready for the arrival of our Messiah. Allow me to clarify a bit: John is not calling on us to prepare our literal homes, of course; but rather, John is calling us to prepare the homes of our hearts. The ancient theologian Tertullian stated it this way: "John called us to

purge our minds of whatever impurity error had imparted, whatever contamination ignorance had engendered, which repentance would sweep and scour away, and cast out. So prepare the home of your heart by making it clean for the Holy Spirit.”³ With his startling dress of camel’s hair, his desolate landscape of wilderness, and his bare-boned sermons of baptism and repentance, John the Baptist, the holy homemaker, is calling us to prepare the homes of our hearts so we might be ready when our Savior looks for a place to be born and to lodge.

Many of us have already started getting our literal homes ready for the arrival of Christmas. We’ve cleaned up the Thanksgiving decorations and put them away. We’ve maybe rearranged and done a little organizing so we could make room for all of the Christmas things that we needed to pull down out of the attic or retrieve from the top of closets. Perhaps we’ve moved furniture and set up the tree, taking several hours as we tried to get the lights to work, hanging all the ornaments that hold such memories. We’ve put the wreaths on the door, placed the nativity scene on the mantle, and inflated the Santa on the lawn. Some of us have spent hours trying to set up our outdoor lights, wondering why, once again, we waited until it was cold and windy to begin this task.

We know how to do this—to get things ready to celebrate Jesus’ birth. Every single year many of us, if not most of us, spend a lot of time cleaning, rearranging, and setting things up, even if we are not hosting a Christmas party. Thanksgiving passes, the Christmas CDs start to play, and we thank God for Advent time and the occasion to get our homes ready for the celebration of Christmas. And there is nothing wrong with any of that. My family began the process this past Friday evening. But John is asking us another question of preparation this day. He is challenging us to spend that same kind of time preparing the home of our hearts for the celebration of Christmas. Can you imagine what might happen if we spent even a fraction of that same kind of preparation time on our hearts?

Just imagine daily using the spiritual discipline of confession to sweep your heart clean of the cobwebs of hate or gossip. Imagine engaging in regular Christian service to scrub into its deep crevices of greed and envy. Imagine reading Scripture in the morning, at the noon hour, and right before sleep so you could take down the pictures of fear and apathy in order to make some new space on your heart’s walls. Just imagine what might happen if we spent the same kind of time on our hearts as we do on our homes. Just imagine what might happen if we took seriously John’s call to prepare the home of our hearts for the celebration of Christmas, to get our soul all ready as our Savior looks once again for a place to be born and to lodge. And those are just a few household cleaning tips we could employ. Of course John, as the Holy Homemaker, has his own cleaning suggestions for our Advent cleaning spree. He strongly suggests we use the powerful tool of repentance in order to sweep, scour, and cast out all that keeps us from being ready for Jesus’ arrival. “Repent,” John preaches. “Turn around. Change direction. Do it now.” That is John’s bare-bones Advent sermon.

Now, I fully realize that just as “John the Baptist” and “Homemaker” make awkward cohorts, so too do the phrases “Christmas cheer” and “Repent!” Gary Charles, pastor of Central Presbyterian in Atlanta, claims that the English word *repent* is a crippled word. It is a tired, old church word that limps around most churches today, handicapped by misuse and overuse. It has been pushed out to the church’s theologi-

cal edge where it still retains its traditional hard and severe sound, posing its ominous threat at impending judgmental doom. And yet, Charles claims, in the gospel of Mark, in these words from wild-man, street-preacher John, “*metanoete* (the Greek word for repent) is actually an imperative invitation. It is an invitation to turn from your past ways of being and living to a future made possible by the grace of God. It is an invitation that means that we are not stuck forever living in ways that knock the breath out of us. With God on the loose in the person of Jesus, we can find a new way to live that is literally a breath of fresh air.”⁴ When wild-man John preaches for us to repent, he does so as one who trusts that new life in God is not only *possible*, but is imminently on its way in Jesus our Christ.

“Repent,” John preaches. Look at where you have been. Look at who you have been. And be honest about it. But, as you do so, beware of making even your act of repentance an idol. Don’t make your sinfulness some kind of strange spiritual badge of honor by getting stuck back in the grime of regret or guilt or brokenness. Look back, be honest, confess, but *then*, do something about it. Repent. Turn around. Change direction. Trust in a future made possible not by who you are, but by who God is, shown most clearly in the one for whom we are getting ready. Trust that God’s goodness is much more powerful than your badness. Repent, turn, prepare the home of your heart, so that you might be ready for the new thing that God is already doing in this world through Jesus.

For that is the whole point, isn’t it? The whole reason we are cleaning out and preparing our hearts is to make some space for God’s audacious arrival into our history, into our world, as Jesus, baby Emmanuel, God-with-us, God-for-us. To make some space in our lives so we might once again be grasped by those baby Savior hands, so we might once again look into that manger on Christmas Eve and be absolutely overwhelmed by awe and by humility that our God loves this world so much that God chose to come among us as one of the least of these—a poor, peasant, Jewish baby. God chose to empty God’s self of power. God chose to empty God’s self of might. God chose to empty God’s self of grandeur. God chose to empty God’s self of distance. God chose to show us in flesh and in blood God’s love for us, as well as God’s desire for our lives, for the life of this world, a desire that we might follow in Jesus’ footsteps and learn how to fully live and how to fully love as children of God.

This Advent season, we are invited to take the cleaning tools of prayer, of confession, of service, of study, *and* of continual repentance, and use them to sweep out the mess of *all* that keeps us from living the good news of God’s claim on our lives, the good news of God’s claim on our world. This Advent season, we are invited to spend time not just preparing our homes for the celebration of Christ’s birth, but even more importantly, to spend serious time preparing our hearts for that celebration, as well. To get our soul ready as Christ once again looks for a place to be born and to lodge.

John the Baptist—the Holy Homemaker. Perhaps it isn’t such an odd title.

Notes

1. It was my congregation’s tradition to bring out the nativity characters one by one and slowly build the scene throughout the season of Advent. On this particular day, since we did not have a John the Baptist character, we dressed up Joseph in some burlap and had him stand in for the prophet.

2. Fred Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 69.
3. Shared in a paper by Rev. Chris Tuttle, "Member of The Well," pastor of Westminster Presbyterian in Durham, NC.
4. Gary Charles and Brian Blount, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 37.