

## Mark 1: 1-8

ISN'T IT STRIKING HOW MARK BEGINS HIS GOSPEL? THERE'S NO ANGEL GABRIEL, NO MARY AND JOSEPH, NO SHEPHERDS OR CHORUS OF HEAVENLY ANGELS, NO FRAZZLED, OVERWHELMED INKEEPER TURNING AWAY THE HOLY FAMILY, AS WE HAVE IN LUKE'S GOSPEL.

THERE'S NO JOSEPH GETTING MESSAGES FROM GOD IN HIS DREAMS, AND NO WISE ONES FROM THE EAST FOLLOWING A STAR, LIKE WE HAVE IN MATTHEW.

AND THERE'S NONE OF THE SOARING LANGUAGE OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN ABOUT THE WORD EXISTING IN THE BEGINNING, AND CO-CREATING WITH THE FATHER, AND THEN BECOMING FLESH AND DWELLING AMONG US, FULL OF GRACE AND TRUTH, REVEALING THE FATHER'S GLORY.

MARK GIVES US NONE OF THAT. HE SIMPLY DECLARES: "THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD."

MARK ANNOUNCES THIS IS A BEGINNING, DECLARES IT WILL BE GOOD NEWS, AND MAKES IT CLEAR THE GOOD NEWS HAS TO DO WITH JESUS.

AND, THE NEXT THING WE KNOW, WE'RE NOT AT A MANGER---WE'RE OUT IN THE WILDERNESS. WE'RE OUT IN THE WILDERNESS, AND WE'RE LISTENING TO A STERN, URGENT, WILD-EYED PROPHET, WEARING THE STRANGE DRESS, EATING A BIZARRE DIET AND PROCLAIMING THAT GOD'S ABOUT TO DO SOMETHING NEW. THERE'S THAT VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS, URGING PEOPLE TO REPENT AND BE BAPTIZED, INSISTING THAT THE MESSIAH IS COMING ANY DAY, AND CALLING UPON THEM TO GET READY FOR WHAT GOD IS DOING!

A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS.

THE OWNER OF THAT VOICE, JOHN THE BAPTIST, WAS LIVING IN A WILDERNESS TIME. THE PEOPLE OF GOD, THE JEWS, HAD WAITED A LONG TIME---A REALLY LONG TIME---FOR GOD TO DO SOMETHING TO DELIVER THEM. IT HAD BEEN CENTURIES SINCE ISAIAH REPORTED THE PEOPLE'S CRY—WE HEARD IT LAST WEEK: "O LORD, WHY DON'T YOU TEAR OPEN THE HEAVENS AND COME DOWN AND SAVE US!" CENTURIES LATER, THEY WERE STILL WAITING FOR GOD TO SHOW UP, AND THEIR WORLD WAS A MESS. POLITICALLY, RELIGIOUSLY, ECONOMICALLY, IT WAS A MESS: THEY WERE LIVING UNDER THE HARSH RULE OF ROMAN OPPRESSION, AND THEIR FAITH WAS FRAGMENTED INTO FACTIONS, AND MOST OF THE PEOPLE WERE POOR. IT FELT LIKE A WILDERNESS, A FRIGHTENING, TERRIFYING, DEATH-DEALING WILDERNESS.

AND, IF ANYTHING, IT WAS WORSE BY THE TIME MARK WROTE HIS GOSPEL—PERHAPS 35 YEARS AFTER THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS. THERE WAS NOW AN ARMED

REBELLION AGAINST ROMAN RULE GOING ON—A REBELLION THAT WOULD BE CRUSHED, AND WOULD END WITH THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM IN 70 A.D. THOSE JEWS WHO HAD BECOME FOLLOWERS OF JESUS WERE WAITING FOR THEIR LORD TO RETURN, AND HE SEEMED TO BE TAKING HIS SWEET TIME ABOUT IT, WHILE THEY CONTINUED SUFFERING UNDER THE ROMANS. THERE WAS FEAR, AND UNCERTAINTY, AND CHAOS, AND DEATH.

THEY WERE LIVING IN THE WILDERNESS.

A TIME LIKE OURS PERHAPS IF YOU WATCH ANY NEWS AT ALL.

AND EVEN THOUGH THE NEWS IS BAD, MOST OF US ARE PRETTY COMFORTABLE AND SAFE. OFTEN OUR BIGGEST WORRY IS HOW IN THE WORLD WE'RE GOING TO GET ALL OF THE DAY'S TASKS DONE. MOST OF US DON'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT WHERE OUR NEXT MEAL IS COMING FROM, OR WHERE WE WILL SLEEP TONIGHT. WE'RE PRETTY COMFORTABLE, AREN'T WE? SO, WHY ALL THIS WILDERNESS TALK?

COULD IT BE THAT UNDERNEATH OUR COMFORTABLE LIVES, THERE IS THE SAME KIND OF EMPTINESS, THE SAME FEAR AND UNCERTAINTY, THE SAME CHAOS, AS PEOPLE EXPERIENCED WHEN JOHN THE BAPTIST CAME ON THE SCENE, AND WHEN MARK WROTE HIS GOSPEL? YOU KNOW, THAT ANXIETY ABOUT THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF IT ALL. THAT LONGING FOR GOD, WHO SOMETIMES SEEMS SO FAR AWAY. THAT RESTLESSNESS WITH A WORLD WHERE THERE IS SO MUCH INJUSTICE, AND SO LITTLE PEACE. THAT WEARINESS, AS WE MAKE THE SAME PREPARATIONS FOR YET ANOTHER CHRISTMAS, AND WE KNOW THAT IN OUR SOUL, ONCE AGAIN, ALL OUR FRANTIC SCRAMBLING TO GET READY, ALL OUR BAKING AND DECORATING, ALL OUR FEASTING WITH FAMILIES AND FRIENDS WILL NOT FILL THAT EMPTINESS INSIDE, AND WE'LL BE MORE THAN READY TO PUT IT ALL AWAY AGAIN ON DECEMBER 26<sup>TH</sup>.

THERE'S A STORY ABOUT A WOMAN WHO GOT SO TIRED OF PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS EACH YEAR THAT SHE ADDED A LARGE CLOSET WITH A DOOR TO HER DEN. INSIDE THE CLOSET, SHE SET UP A FULLY DECORATED ARTIFICIAL CHRISTMAS TREE AND, WHEN THE SEASON ARRIVES, SHE JUST OPENS THE DOOR. WHEN THE SEASON IS OVER, SHE CLOSES THE DOOR. AGAIN. JOHN THE BAPTIST SIMPLY WOULD NOT PUT WITH THAT. BEFORE THE WOMAN KNOWS IT, HE WILL PLANT AN AXE IN THE THAT DOOR AND SEND WOOD CHIPS FLYING ALL OVER THE PLACE.

JOHN, AFTER ALL, IS THE VOICE CRYING OUT IN THE WILDERNESS, ANNOUNCING THAT GOD IS GOING TO TURN EVERYTHING UPSIDE-DOWN, ESPECIALLY OUR TIRED, OLD WAY OF MUDDLING THROUGH LIFE. THAT PROPHET WITH THE STRANGE DIET AND DRESS SHOUTED HIS MESSAGE NOT IN THE CENTER OF POWER, NOT IN JERUSALEM, BUT OUT IN THE

**WILDERNESS. HE ATTRACTED PEOPLE WHO WERE LOOKING FOR SOMETHING MORE IN THEIR LIVES---MEANING, PERHAPS, OR TRUTH, OR JUSTICE, OR A FULLER, RICHER LIFE, EVEN IF IT WOULD BE A LESS COMFORTABLE AND COZY LIFE.**

**HIS MESSAGE WAS BOLD AND STRAIGHTFORWARD. "PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD! REPENT, AND BE BAPTIZED, FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS. ONE MORE POWERFUL THAT I IS COMING. I BAPTIZE YOU WITH WATER, BUT HE WILL BAPTIZE YOU WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT."**

**MANY WERE CONVINCED THAT THIS WAS THE WORD FROM GOD THEY HAD BEEN WAITING FOR! THEY WERE STIRRED UP TO BELIEVE THAT GOD'S PROMISES WERE STILL VALID, THAT GOD WAS ABOUT TO DO SOMETHING SPECTACULAR, THAT THE MESSIAH WAS KNOCKING AT THE DOOR!**

**DO YOU SUPPOSE THAT, JUST LIKE WAY BACK THEN, GOD IS UP TO SOMETHING NEW TODAY? DO YOU SUPPOSE THERE'S STILL A VOICE TO BE HEARD, OUT IN THE WILDERNESS, CRYING OUT, "PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD! REPENT, AND KNOW YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN!"**

**MANY DON'T LIKE THAT WORD. REPENT. IT SOUNDS SO HARSH. IN OUR SOCIETY WE'RE SUPPOSED TO FEEL GOOD ABOUT OURSELVES AND ALL WE'VE ACCOMPLISHED, WHEN CHRISTMAS IS NOTHING BUT ANOTHER EXCUSE TO INDULGE OURSELVES. WHEN WE ACT AS IF WE ARE OUR OWN GODS AND DON'T NEED TO ANSWER TO ANYONE, THERE'S A VOICE, SHOUTING OUT IN THE WILDERNESS, "REPENT!"**

**REPENT! TURN AROUND! IT'S A HARSH WORD, BUT A GOOD WORD. IT REMINDS US TO GET ON THE RIGHT PATHWAY, TO WALK THE LORD'S WAY AND NOT OUR OWN! JUST AS WE CLEAN AND BEAUTIFY OUR HOMES FOR CHRISTMAS, WE NEED TO USE THIS SEASON OF ADVENT TO ASK GOD TO CLEAN OUR HEARTS AS WE AWAIT CHRIST. WE NEED TO RETURN TO GOD, TO LISTEN TO GOD'S VOICE, TO ASK FOR GOD'S FORGIVENESS, AND OPEN OURSELVES TO GOD'S WILL AS FORGIVEN CHILDREN. PEOPLE WERE DRAWN TO JOHN THE BAPTIST BECAUSE OF WHAT HE OFFERED THEM...A CHANCE TO COME CLEAN, TO STOP PRETENDING THEY WERE SOMEONE ELSE AND START OVER AGAIN.**

**NOTED PREACHER FRED CRADDOCK LIKENS IT TO "A THIRD GRADER, TRYING TO SO HARD TO FINISH HIS MATH TEST WHILE THERE'S STILL TIME, AND ALL THE WHILE THE TEACHER IS FUSSING, "HURRY UP, CHILDREN!" WHEN THE THIRD GRADER ERASES A MISTAKE ON HIS TEST, MAKING A BIG BLACK MARK AND TEARING THE PAPER, HE STARTS TO CRY. HE'S CONVINCED HE'S FAILED, AND THEN THE TEACHER COMES OVER, AND THE BOY IS TERRIFIED—AND THE TEACHER GIVES HIM A NEW SHEET OF PAPER AND SAYS, "IT'S OK, WHY YOU TRY AGAIN."**

**WHAT STRIKES ME ABOUT JOHN THE BAPTIST IS THAT HE WAS NOWHERE NEAR A CHURCH, AND THOSE WHO INSISTED ON STAYING INSIDE THE CHURCH NEVER HEARD HIS MESSAGE. ONLY THOSE WHO WERE WILLING TO ENTER THE WILDERNESS GOT TO TASTE HIS FREEDOM, AND MANY OF THEM WERE STILL THERE WHEN THE SPECTACULAR SOMEONE ARRIVED, FAR FROM THE CIVILIZED CENTER OF TOWN.**

**I'M GUESSING EVERY ONE OF US HAS SOME IDEA WHERE OUR OWN WILDERNESS LIES, AS WELL AS A LONG LIST OF ALL THE GOOD REASONS WHY WE SHOULD NOT GO THERE. WE ARE COMFORTABLE HERE, AFTER ALL. WE KNOW THE ROPES AND WE KNOW WE WILL BE FED. WHY SHOULD WE HUNT GOD ANYWHERE ELSE? I DON'T KNOW, UNLESS IT IS THAT VOICE CRYING OUT IN THE WILDNERNESS, THE ONE YOU CANNOT QUITE MAKE OUT FROM HERE. IF WE ONLY LISTEN FOR GOD IN CHURCH, WE WILL MISS HALF OF THE MESSAGE. THE GOOD NEWS IS ALWAYS BEGINNING SOMEWHERE IN THE WORLD, FOR THOSE WITH EARS TO HEAR AND HEARTS TO GO WHEREVER THE WAY MAY LEAD. MAY IT BE SO. AMEN.**