

“Opening the Vision Channel”
B, Advent One; 10:00 am
Mark 1:1-8; December 3, 2017
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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I. WHAT A GUY! WHAT A SMELL!

Picture this. A wild-looking and seemingly crazy guy out in the desert, looking a bit like a modern survivalist; sounding like a prophet—though we’re just not sure Prophets were not known for their fashion sense or being dressed in their best bib and tucker.

But camel hair?! That might be pushing it. And we’d be smelling it! Especially pungent because no honey can smell sweet enough to cover up the locusts on your breath.

And his ranting and challenging everyone to change their lives! What to make of this?

Is he on some kind of “vision quest?” Like spiritual seekers have gone on since the dawn of time?

Picture yourself there. You’ve left the safety of the city walls and traipsed out into the desert to see what this man is all about. To see and hear what everyone is talking about. To find out if there’s something you ought to be doing; a new path you’d better go down to save your life. And what is this talk of Baptism? A “baptism of *repentance*?”

II. RECLAIM REPENT

Reeeee---PENT! Change your ways! Confess your sins. Turn your life around (even if said life was not all that bad to begin with.)

How often do we take this as “Straighten up”, change your ways—you’d better shape up or else—voices in our heads of hellfire and brimstone preachers of our youth (or in the movies!)

We can end up feeling disoriented at best or completely disconnected from our faith when these teachings and interpretations don’t resonate with us.

What if we begin Advent by taking a fresh listen to our dear John, and a fresh run at this ingrained idea of “repentance?” Repent needs to be “reclaimed.” Re-envisioned. Re-imagined.”

For it doesn’t mean “Feel bad about yourself. Today, especially, on John the Baptist Sunday.” It doesn’t mean, “dig up some sins you haven’t really committed, or even weren’t that bad, just so you’d have something to feel sorry about. And take to Confession.”

David Henson says that we’ve made this a singular conversion moment instead of a joy-filled life-change.

He reminds us: “repentance isn’t a momentary instance of remorse and forgiveness, but rather a *journey of transformation*. It is about restoring and deepening our union with God and others. It is about seeing the world as it might be, where hate, injustice and violence are no longer. It is about seeing swords shaped into ploughshares. Repentance is about hope, not fear.”

“It is the process of seeing that God has made holy the ground — *whatever* ground — we find ourselves on. Seeing God where *we* are changes us, too. Suddenly there is hope for the future — not just *my* future, but for *our* future.”

III. JOHN THE BAPTIST

To be on that journey of transformation, says our wild and camel-hair-shirted John, we have to start by “clearing the path.” Making the paths straight is clearing the road of the underbrush, taking out the unhealthy diversions and turns. Turn that path and our thinking toward God.

“John told them,” says _____ sincerely turn to God, come clean, seek to move with the Holy, Healing Spirit and pay attention—Emmanuel (God-with-us) is present and will be revealed soon. John’s goal was to get people individually close enough to the Holy Spirit on the inside to participate in what God wanted to do on the outside.” (p. 191, *The Rest*)

IV. CLEAR THE CHANNEL!

So, how do we do that? What does it look like to “clear the path,” turn to God, pay attention, make room for the Holy Spirit?

We start by looking at the static. What’s getting in the way? What is keeping our channel from being clear, in ourselves and in our collective life. By asking ourselves: “what’s my channel?” “What am I a conduit for?” “What is flowing through me—and what is clogging up the channel so that what I *want* to flow through is not able to?

“Channeling” is a term that’s gotten a reputation for being pretty “woo-woo” these days, I realize! But it’s also an ancient spiritual practice –something we might reclaim and re-envision, much as we are reclaiming the meaning of repentance. “Make smooth the road for the Lord” says John. “Open the channel of your life to let the Holy Spirit flow in and through you.”

V. COLLECTIVE REPENTANCE CHANNEL

In our communal life, sometimes clearing the channel means standing up and preaching—being a lonely voice in the wilderness. Last week, we talked of 300+ Christian theologians standing up and saying, “This is not what Christianity should look like.”

This week, a group of 12, put that critique into action by saying, “This! This is what the Bible says and what we as followers of Jesus (God incarnate, Emmanuel) believe should be the message and actions of Christians. EVEN if it means we get arrested for standing up for the “least of these”—the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and homeless.”

Twelve ministers staged a “Bible-Read” in the Capitol and read over 2000 bible verses aloud, urging the leaders of our country to consider the needs of all people as they made decisions. They kept reading those bible verses over the bullhorns of the officials, until they were handcuffed and hauled off to jail. And then they started singing “This Little Light of Mine, I’m gonna let it shine!”

This scene might not have looked *exactly* like John the Baptist. They were in black and beige robes, with clergy stoles. But.....message might have been similar.

And, this kind of public protest might not be our cup of tea, or what we think is the best to stand up for our faith. But, you have to admire their convictions and acknowledge that this is one way to “clear the channel” and to declare, loud and clear, the “way of the Lord”, and attempt to straighten out some paths!

VI. JOHN THE BAPTIST/ST. FRANCIS

Down through the ages, we have had other examples of repentance, transformed lives, living in love towards God and others. Of *being* a Channel.

Scott Daniels paints an insightful picture in “*The Rest That Works*” of St. Francis as a disciple of Christ who picked up where John the Baptist left off:

“Originally named for John the Baptist, St. Francis of Assisi is an example of someone who started where John did, but then took that next step in learning how to lose himself and be like a child again relative to the Living God. Francis kept a beginner’s mind and focused on aligning with Divine Love, moment by moment. He made a commitment to poverty, though he could have enjoyed quite the life of prestige, power and wealth, in order to stay wholly dependent on God.

He made himself a channel of the spirit of God—became the change he wanted to see in the world. John the Baptist and St. Francis both had the world at their fingertips (remember, John was the son of a high Temple priest, Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, who was also from a priestly family.

“Yet both John and Francis discovered that without a personal relationship with God, even ruling the world around them wouldn’t be enough. Each chose to put God first and found the world at his fingertips in a new way.

Francis especially fell in love with the world in a new way. He experienced nothing less than worship in breathing, walking, singing, working and playing in openness to God. He found joy in everything as he gained the ability to perceive the Living God in it all.” (Rest, p. 194)

What is known as the Prayer of St. Francis was probably not written by him, but it sums up his approach to life:

MAKE ME A CHANNEL OF YOUR PEACE

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me bring love.
Where there is offense, let me bring pardon.
Where there is discord, let me bring union.
Where there is error, let me bring truth.
Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.
Where there is despair, let me bring hope.
Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.
Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.
O Master, let me not seek as much
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love,
for it is in giving that one receives,
it is in self-forgetting that one finds,
it is in pardoning that one is pardoned,
it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life.

VII. WHAT WE CHANNEL

What do *we* channel?

Sometimes clearing the channel means clearing the plaque of the edges that we’ve built up with our expectations and our picture of the vision. Jesus was NOT what John the Baptist was expecting! Later, after Jesus’ ministry had gotten off and rolling, John sent his disciples to Jesus and Co. to ask: “Are you IT?”

²⁻³ John, meanwhile, had been locked up in prison. When he got wind of what Jesus was doing, he sent his own disciples to ask, “Are you the One we’ve been expecting, or are we still waiting?”

⁴⁻⁶ Jesus told them, “Go back and tell John what’s going on:

The blind see,
The lame walk,
Lepers are cleansed,
The deaf hear,
The dead are raised,
The wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side.

“Is this what you were expecting? Then count yourselves most blessed!”

What are we a conduit of? And where do we, like John, need to get ourselves and our expectations out of the way.

What do we need to clear in our hearts? Clear the path in our hearts to God. What’s making static? Creating interference? In our radio channel? Our life channel?

John the Baptizer (the MSG)

1 ¹⁻³ The good news of Jesus Christ—the Message!—begins here, following to the letter the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

Watch closely: I'm sending my preacher ahead of you;
He'll make the road smooth for you.

Thunder in the desert!

Prepare for God's arrival!

Make the road smooth and straight!

4-6 John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel-hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey.

7-8 As he preached he said, "The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out."

Bruce Epperly sends us into Advent from John the Baptist out in the desert to the birth at Bethlehem with this encouragement:

"We don't need to wait for God's coming: we need to be God's coming people NOW!"

(Channels of Emmanuel, I would suggest!)

"Each moment is holy in a God-filled universe. Yet, no moment is final or all-encompassing. Still, we need to be awake for we might miss God's blessings by being too preoccupied with our

own small agendas.this day might usher in the divine Kairos, the in-breaking of divine infinity in the course of our moment-by-moment existences."

"To be godly is to seek the god's eye view of your life and every situation, connecting every moment with God's dynamic and everlasting, ever-living and ever-changing vision of healing love. "

"In the few weeks remaining till the annual celebration of Jesus' birth, there is much to do. Yet, these few weeks participates in God's everlasting journey. The Christmas spirit is more than buying gifts; it is a transformed mind, changed heart, and caring hands. It is becoming Christ-like as we await the advent of something amazing out on the horizon.

The pathways need to be made straight (the channels cleared!)- but not preventative of holy meandering - in our churches and our lives so that we might be holy, pure, godly, and a little bit wild and crazy - like John the Baptist - as we walk the road of repentance, changed lives and minds with Christ as our companion.

What's your channel? Better yet: What are you channeling? What are you tuned into, and allowing to flow through? Let us journey into the land of Advent, seeking to be changed from the inside out, channel clear, static broken through.

"Pray, stay open, pay attention and take action!"

Channels of Emmanuel.

Let us sing, "Make Me a Channel of Your Peace", as we come to the Table, that ultimate conduit of God's love and presence.