

## **“Pointing to Life”**

Mark 1:1-8

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### **The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**

**It is written in Isaiah the prophet:**

**"I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
 who will prepare your way—  
 "a voice of one calling in the desert,  
 'Prepare the way for the Lord,  
 make straight paths for him.' And so John came, baptizing in the  
 desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of  
 sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went  
 out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the  
 Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt  
 around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his  
 message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of  
 whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you  
 with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."**

Despite the sagging economy, Christmas decorations are everywhere. Some have been up a long time. I started seeing them just after Halloween.

You get to where you tune them out because they are everywhere. You tune them out that is, until it's really dark and the lights start to twinkle. Some of the displays are magical. They create a winter wonderland here in Dallas, where snow is unlikely. Some are beautiful. Others, though, are so tacky and gaudy and so completely unrelated to any idea of Jesus they are almost funny.

Last year when I lived in Fort Smith I remember driving home from work one evening in early December. Every day, on my usual route home, I passed the tidy white brick building that was Fentress Mortuary. Most days I paid no attention; the mortuary blended into the background. You don't really want to think about mortuaries every day when you're driving home. But this particular day I noticed something different about Fentress. There were

Christmas decorations up! They had done the ‘hanging of the greens’ right there at the mortuary!

It was tastefully done. I don’t think it was a lit display, just the green swags and large red bows and wreaths. It gave me pause. Why would they put Christmas decorations up at a mortuary?

Surely not for the dearly departed; they could care less about Christmas decorations, being as they are in the presence of the Real Thing, not just some cheap imitation. So the decorations are not for them. Are they for the families? Are they supposed to give some sort of comfort? I probably wouldn’t even notice Christmas decorations if I were there to grieve. The Christmas greenery seemed out of place, there at the mortuary.

This is exactly the kind of disconnect we get when we hear John the Baptist ranting and raving on December 7<sup>th</sup> when most of us are at least *thinking* of getting into the spirit of Christmas. What in the world does a wilderness preacher have to say to us about the Nativity? What is the connection between John the Baptist and the Christ Child?

This passage we just heard is the beginning of the gospel of Mark. Mark begins differently than Matthew and Luke. There is no birth narrative, no genealogy, no lead up to Christ’s birth. Just bam! John the Baptist<sup>1</sup>.

John the Baptist, on location in Palestine, about fifteen miles east of Jerusalem. John lives somewhere out in the desert. It’s close to the settlement of Qumran, a desert community of religious types<sup>2</sup>. It’s a lonely landscape, frequented by hermits, outcasts, and bandits. John lives alone.

It’s not that far from Jerusalem, but the landscape is much more austere than in the city. For one, you are down lower. Instead of being up on the high hills, you are in the Jordan River Valley and you are *surrounded by* hills. Also, it is much drier here; there is not much vegetation. Mainly grasses and low bushes. There is not much to live off of, so it is no surprise John eats whatever he can get hold of---locusts and wild honey. There’s other reasons for this diet. John eats this stuff because he is living a very simple lifestyle, **and** because it’s what prophets are supposed to eat. Says so in the Old Testament.

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<sup>1</sup> There’s so many Johns in the New Testament, it’s a little confusing. There is John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin, born of the aging Elizabeth (Mary’s cousin). There’s the disciple John, there’s the evangelist John, and there’s the letters of yet another John. But it is the Baptist we encounter today.

<sup>2</sup> where the many Qumran Dead Sea scrolls were discovered in the 1950’s.

The locusts, the wild honey, the camel hair clothing, the leather belt. It all points to who John is. Sounds a little crazy, but it marks him as a prophet. John fits the pattern.

Then the lights go on! Quoting from the prophet Isaiah (but not exactly quoting. . .is this Isaiah, or Malachi or Exodus, or is John confused?), we see John center stage. The dusty, thirsty crowd has come from the city because they've heard about him; they want to see for themselves, hear for themselves. John is standing up on a rock, holding his staff, his long hair flying in the breeze. He is gaunt. His long bony finger points to something, Someone, beyond. The crowd is not sure who. All they know is it is Someone significant. Maybe the Messiah. One can only hope.

“Repent! Repent!” Like the stuff he eats, John's preaching is not very palatable. It would not draw a megachurch crowd. It's not the prosperity gospel. No. It is about repentance, turning away from sin, turning back to God. What we will come to understand is John preaches a gospel that will tell first of his own death and then the death of the one to whom his long bony finger has pointed. John preaches of a Life to come; John points to the Life that is coming, but death will appear to win before Life does.

This is where the theology of the crib and the theology of the cross meet. It is a strange intersection. And yet don't we all know, in the birth of something new or someone new, there is always danger? There is always risk, even the risk of death. The gospel of Mark is a gospel that emphasizes the cross, even here, even at the beginning. And Mark has the audacity to call it “good news.”

We cannot have the crib without the cross. We cannot greet the Christ child without groaning under the shadow of the cross. This is not an easy message, but it is gospel. Called to repentance, called to walk in Christ's footsteps, John warns it will be anything but easy.

John the Baptist is one of the most commonly portrayed saints in all of Western art. John is usually shown as a hermit dressed in animal skins. He is often drawn with a lamb<sup>3</sup>, or a staff, or a scroll. There are literally scores of famous paintings of John: John baptizing Jesus, John in the Jordan, John preaching in the desert, John's beheading.

But there is one famous painting of John that is quite unique in its setting.

One artist painted John the Baptist at the cross.

In an impossible juxtaposition we find John the Baptist at the foot of the cross. From a merely historical point of view, John couldn't have been there

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<sup>3</sup> because of his phrase in greeting Christ, “Behold the Lamb of God”

(because he was killed before the crucifixion). But Matthias Grunewald, when he painted his masterpiece *The Crucifixion*<sup>4</sup>, Grunewald wasn't thinking of history. Grunewald was thinking theology.

In this painting, John the Baptist stands to the right of the crucified Christ, garbed in a red robe, holding a book, a lamb at his feet. The Baptist's right hand is fully extended, and he is pointing. His long bony index finger points to the crucified one. By all appearances it looks as though he is pointing to death. An inscription, in Latin, in the background behind the Baptist says, "He must increase and I must decrease."<sup>5</sup> It looks like death. It looks like diminishment. But of course, because we know the end of the story, we know it isn't Death. We know it's Life.

It is a fitting visual bookend to the beginning of the gospel of Mark. In the beginning, John points to the Christ. In Grunewald's painting, John points to Christ.

About those Christmas decorations at the mortuary? I'll bet they are up again this year. It is actually quite fitting they are. Because they do send a message, for those who have ears to hear. They do point to something else, for those who are looking.

And the message is this: There is Life. Life comes, even in the midst of death, even when you least expect it, even when it is the last thing on your mind, Life comes. Life comes, because Christ has come. These decorations we use, they are just window dressing. They are just pancake makeup to shore us up, to give us a little spring in our step, to cheer us when everything else may seem gloomy. They are just a tiny little reminder---Christ has come; we are a visited planet. They aren't the Real Thing.

They just. . . point. . .

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<sup>4</sup> Grunewald painted this in the 1500's. It was a the centerpiece of a very large triptych called the Isenheim altarpiece. It was originally set at a hospital chapel in Germany and later moved to a small church in France, where you can still see it today.

<sup>5</sup> From the gospel of John-----