

Text: Mark 1:4-11
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Zion Lutheran Church- North Battleford
Rev. Sheldon Gattinger
sheldon.gattinger@gmail.com

Grace and Peace be Unto You From our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

John the Baptist most likely isn't someone that you want to have sitting across the table from you at Sunday dinner. Let's be honest with each other, John the Baptist comes off as a pretty odd guy. Just consider with me for a moment how he is portrayed in the gospels:

1. He wore rough clothes made of camel's hair and had a large leather belt fashioned around his waist. (Matt. 3:4)
2. Compared to Dr. Phil he wasn't very "touchy feely". In fact, he apparently had no problem with telling people to repent (Matt. 3:2) or calling the Pharisees a "brood of vipers!". (Matt. 3:7)
3. Lastly, John's dietary habits leave much to be desired as we are told that he regularly consumed locusts and wild (read it as dirty and unpasteurized) honey. (Mark 1:6) And of course, since John neglected to cut his hair or even shave- the wild honey and locusts undoubtedly found itself stuck in John's long beard.

No doubt about it, to our sensible modern minds, John the Baptist comes across as being a weird duck. To be honest, it is probably not just us- I am willing to wager that people 2000 years ago thought that John was a strange bird.

When one thinks about John the Baptist with his rough demeanor, questionable diet, and poor hygiene- one is bound to wonder to them self if this is the best spokesperson that our almighty God could find to herald the coming and ministry of his Son. (Luke 3:15-18) After all this is the Son of God that we are talking about! This is the Messiah!

But thankfully God doesn't think like us, and thankfully God doesn't act like us either. In fact, the Bible is a great testament to this fact. As the old saying goes, "God's ways are not our ways." Since the beginning of time God has been surprising the world with his love, justice, and grace. (Psalm 47) To live a life of faith is to live a life of surprise...

Just a few short and fleeting weeks ago, we celebrated the Christmas story and miracle. We gathered together as family and as friends, we drank egg-nogg, we shared stories, we sang the old hymns.

We have come to look forward to Christmas...we know the story, we know the hymns, and we know the event. These have become comfortable to us. Over time, they have been engrained in us- by our Church and our world.

But please, stop with me and ponder for a moment what a radical story the Christmas narrative really is. Here in this sublime story of parents, shepherds, a baby, and magi we encounter the Son of God himself- IN THE FLESH! (Col. 1:21-23)

And does this Messiah, the Son of God, come to the world as an earthly king, a queen, a prince, a mighty warrior, or even a noble man? No.

Rather, God comes into the world in the most unexpected of ways: A helpless and homeless child born to refugee parents in a backwater town outside of Jerusalem.

I think that it is fair to say that no one, not even God's own prophets (Isaiah 9:1-7), saw this coming. But then again, maybe we shouldn't be too shocked for God has a rich history of surprising us and catching the world off guard.

I imagine that this aspect of God rings true in each of our lives. For I am sure that God (on occasion) has surprised us all. It is a theology of the cross at work in each of our lives.

Six months ago, I never thought that I would be standing here- and I am willing to bet that you never thought that I would be standing here (and now after hearing me preach, you may wish that I was not standing here).

In our coming time together I know that God is going to surprise us, love us, encourage us, and (at times) challenge us. He will come to us in ways that we never imagined and he will use us in ways that we never thought were possible. Even though, just like John the Baptist before us, we are unworthy to unite his sandals God will gift us and bless us

richly. But once again, it might not be in ways that we expect...

For me, I only need to look out into this congregation to witness first hand how God has blessed you, me, and this church. Hopefully, I don't mess it up...

As we begin our ministry together, I am reminded of a story that an old (well, to be honest. he wouldn't want me to call him old) pastor shared with me as I readied myself for ordination.

The story that he shared with me I find myself almost recalling daily for it is one of those pieces of wisdom that one encounters all too seldom in life.

Now the story that he shared with me on that memorable afternoon that we gathered together for coffee he called "A Tale of 3 Pastors". The story he shared with me went like this...

A new pastor- full of vigor and fresh out of seminary began his first call.. During his first sermon he announced to his congregation his vision of ministry: "I am your pastor, I am here to serve you." And serve them he did. In fact he did everything for the congregation from washing the coffee cups to even babysitting their pets. Of course, this life of service took its toll and the new pastor began to experience burn out. Quickly he began to resent his congregation for taking advantage of him. After some time had passed, he left the church disillusioned and angry.

After some time had passed, the congregation called another pastor. Quickly this pastor made himself and his will known by stating (in so many words), "I am your pastor, serve me." Well, serve him the congregation did- they cut his lawn, met his every request, and saw to it that he wanted for nothing.

However, over time, the congregation came to resent this pastor as they felt that their loving-kindness was being taken advantage of. Soon many of the members stopped coming and the pastor had to leave.

No we come to the last pastor in our story...When this new pastor arrived at the congregation she announced to her new parishioners, "Here I am, Here you are- there is God, let us serve him together." And serve him together they did.

They encouraged each other, they supported each other, and they used their gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:7-11) in their service to God and their neighbours. Quickly a healthy and vibrant ministry formed that drew others into their community of faith.

After recounting this tale to you, it should come as no surprise to you as to which of these models of ministry that I hope you and I will strive to put into practice.

Like the prophets, the apostles, and John the Baptist before us, God is calling us to great things.

Throughout history, God has displayed through his love that he doesn't call perfect people (Jer. 1:4-8) but rather, faithful people.

And that (in a nutshell) is my prayer for myself and for you- that we will strive to faithfully serve our Lord together.

Amen