

“Come Out and Dance”
Mark 1:1-8 2nd Sunday in Advent December 4, 2011 Rev. Kenneth Heasley
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A cartoon depicts another wilderness, showing a husband and wife driving along at a rapid pace on a desert road. The wife is saying, “I know we’re lost, but I didn’t want to say anything about it because we are making such good time.”

Is that what Advent feels like? As I hear the questions: “Are you ready for Christmas? Are you done shopping? Do you have your tree up yet?—Only 20 shopping days left.” I sometimes feel like we are doing just the same—rushing through the desert of busyness, making good time—but lost nonetheless. God only knows where we are going—but we’re ahead of schedule!

In this season, we have a confusion of symbols and a mixture of messages. It gets very difficult to separate the meaning of Christmas from the commercial context. Each year it seems that the meaning gets more diminished and the context more pervasive. James Fallow, a far eastern writer for the *Atlantic Monthly* shared this observation in one of his articles, showing the confusion and the mixture. In a large Japanese department store, he came across a display featuring Santa Claus holding the infant Jesus, in a sleigh being pulled by seven dwarfs.

Or this, a child’s drawing showing the manger scene: Mary and Joseph, Jesus in a manger, plus a plump male figure standing nearby. When asked, ‘Who is that?’ pointing to the plump figure, the child replied, ‘That is Round John Virgin.’

Who are the people, what are the symbols around Advent that point us in the direction we need to go? We have the wreath in place, now glowing more brightly as a reminder that in the descending deepening darkness there is a growing light—it points us toward the center light of Christmas Eve, the Christ-Child. The candelabra are in place with unlit candles—in expectation of the coming light on Christmas Eve.

Today’s Gospel lesson is about another pointer—John the Baptist, the one who stood on Jordan’s bank. Today, John the Baptist is front and center—as one who prepares us for and points us toward—and that is the message and the symbol of Advent.

Who was this John? The opening of Mark’s gospel gives us few words about John; he remains hidden in the events revealed to us. He was a unique individual, but not terribly unlike others of that period in Jewish history, a period of ‘end-lookers’, called a period of apocalypticism. That period of Jewish history sounds some chords that resound with familiarity for our day. There are some current day forth tellings of the end time: The Myan calendar proposition, the numerological calculations of some, and not to forget the dire financial predictions about the collapse of the Euro, the escalating debt ceiling, plus the gloom and doom warnings of Republicans and Democrats as we hurtle toward another election year. The end is coming, the end is coming—that was the milieu of John the Baptist.

John proclaimed hope. He held out a message of hope about God's coming into that historical situation of cruelty and military oppression. He proclaimed a message of hope and consequence, a message of dire implication and new possibility. John called for people to change—to change their attitude, to be penitent about their sin, and to be intentional about their love of God; to change their outward behavior and their inner heart, to become whole hearted in their devotion to God. But even more importantly, this message of John was not just something that was up close and personal, his message was for a full-hearted turning of the community. John's concern was for the whole community of faith to come to grips with itself and to change from the inside out in anticipation, in hope for God's coming. So John stands in the old water of the Jordan, the water the people crossed to claim the land as God's. John stands in that water and cries out for that same deliverance anew. John promises the coming of the day of the Lord, the day when the Spirit would be poured out, for good or ill, on all flesh. John pointed beyond himself to one who is greater—John pointed to God! And some believed and came out to the Jordan, and many scoffed and said “Mad Man.” What poured out for John was the wrath of the Roman and Herodian soldiers for he was arrested and beheaded.

This picture of John sees him as a pathetic, mis-understood figure. A sidebar of history. But John was more. John is more than meets the eye; his message is deeper than meets the ear. Mark's gospel lesson for today is itself a pointer beyond the one who points. As Mark tells us of John, he is also telling us that John is the fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah and Malachi, that he is more than a strange apocalyptic figure, he is Elijah, the precursor of God and his death is the in breaking of the Day of the Lord. John is the preparer, the pointer; he is the one who announces. The one who comes is the mighty one, the strong one, the expected one, the awaited one. The only way to be ready is to be looking clearly for that one, the Son of God. The only way to be ready is to be ready to leave behind the old and to be claimed anew by God's delivering action. The only way to be ready is to accept the forgiveness of God, to accept the new existence of grace filled love. Are we ready to do that? Are we ready to leave behind all the dross and deeds that we have accumulated in the past months of our living that fall short of God's intention for us? Are we ready to admit, in spite of the good appearances we put up, that some sin has crept into our thoughts and our words and our doings? Are we ready to open our arms, our living, our hearts to be struck by God's amazing love in a new and deeper way? That is where we are being pointed as people of faith.

We know to whom John points, we know for whom John waited. We know it is not Frosty, nor Rudolph, nor Santa Claus. In these days, it is tempting to make good time toward--- --Frosty, or Rudolph, or Santa Claus. But it is not so important to be making good time as it is to know where we are going.

Wallace Ford tells this powerful story. “Once upon a time there was a land where the whole community lived under one big glass dome. For generations the families had been born, lived and died under the glass dome. And the story that passed down from generation to generation was if you ever did step outside of the dome, you would surely die. So, no one ever dared to step outside.

In fact, the community decided that there was one crime so dastardly that the punishment for anyone who committed that crime would be to banish that person outside the dome, which would mean certain death.

One day, to the community's horror, a person did commit such a crime. The punishment was swift. The whole community escorted the guilty one to the edge of the glass dome and pushed that person into the world beyond the dome. And then they pressed their noses to the glass wall to watch the person die. (Can't you see them with faces pressed against the glass, like kids on a school bus when the windows are all fogged over? Each one peering over the shoulder of the one in front to get a better look.)

At first, the person lay on the ground, face down, shivering in fear, wondering in terror how death would come. Muscles were all clenched up, braced for whatever would happen—and certainly something would happen!

But, behold, nothing happened. After a bit the person rolled over and, slowly with head raised, looked around. The people in the glass dome watched, some silently, some with knowing comments—even though they had never seen this before. Now slowly, the person stood up and looked all around, and began to dance; to dance softly on the green, green grass. Soon the person outside the dome was jumping up and down and shouting joyously, “Come out and dance!” “Come out and dance with me.” The people inside were filled with such confusion and stress over what they were seeing that they got buckets of black paint and large paint brushes. They started at the bottom of the walls and painted the walls solid black, up as high as they could reach and as high as necessary so they could no longer see the joyous, dancing one outside. Then they all breathed a sigh of relief and went back to just the way things had been before that day.”

The people in the dome continued to be quite, quite busy—deepening the darkness rather than greeting the light; ignoring the pointer rather than joining in the dance. They were making good time—but didn't know where they were going. Advent is the time to see the pointer, to hear the invitation, to prepare for the one—who comes. Amen.