

12/8/19 'Going Out of Your Way to Find Jesus' Rev. Jane Courtright

Matthew 3:1-12

The **Gospel of Matthew** begins with the genealogy of Jesus.

The **Gospel of Mark** begins with John the Baptizer appearing in the wilderness. The **Gospel of Luke** begins with the birth of John the Baptizer foretold. The **Gospel of John**, after the Word, begins with the testimony of John the Baptizer!

*Note that not one of these gospels begins with **an angel** whispering in Mary's ear.

*There are **NO shepherds** keeping watch over their flocks by night.

*...**No magi** from the east following a star.

*...**no big-eyed animals** standing around a straw-filled manger!

That's because the good news of Jesus **begins** with an **old-timer prophet** named John! John, dressed in a **camel hair coat** cinched with a **leather belt**, his **hair and beard** looking as if they've never been cut, *skinny as a cactus*... maybe because of his diet of locusts and honey!

In short, this John the Baptist was dressed in the **exact same outfit** that Elijah wore 800 years before him!

You & I may not grasp this fashion statement right away, but you can **BE SURE** that those standing around John **certainly COULD!** These people understood this man to be a messenger – predicted by Isaiah, dressed like Elijah, a messenger of God: **a prophet in the classic style!**

Maybe that's why people flocked to him...I don't know.

Everything that I've learned about John makes me pretty sure that **most people** would have gone out of their way **NOT to see him!**

He sounds like one of those evangelists on the streets: you know, the ones that wave their Bibles and tell you that you are going straight to Hell if you don't repent right now! (and of course, they are the only ones who know how you're supposed to do that and whether or not you've succeeded!)

But, HOLD ON, there is one big difference between those evangelists and JOHN: Self-appointed prophets tend to plant themselves right in your way...so that you have to cross over to the other side of the street JUST TO AVOID THEM! They kind of 'get in your face and just dare you to ignore them!

Whereas, John planted himself right in the middle of NOWHERE!

He set himself up in the wilderness, and anyone who wanted to hear what he had to say had to go to a whole lot of trouble to get there: like borrowing a neighbor's donkey, or setting off on foot with enough water for the journey...one which led down lonely trails thick with bandits!

You have to wonder JUST WHY someone would do a thing like that, especially someone from Jerusalem, which was right where the temple was, and the rabbis were. If someone wanted to hear a message from God, then, why not stay in the city, maybe go to some extra services or make an appt. with a priest?

I think that anyone who would turn away from Jerusalem and set off for the wilderness was looking for something else – something the temple could not or would not give.

And John had this something else, apparently! He may have looked as scary as someone from another planet, but when he spoke, he spoke clearly, one sentence at a time. He didn't have many details. He didn't know the name of the one who was

coming, for instance, or what that one would look like. But John knew that the old world was about to end, and a new world was spinning into being!

The Holy Spirit had become all but covered up in Jerusalem, with pretend piety, temple taxed and priestly hocus-pocus. Now, not all the priests or the people behaved this way...but there was enough that the Spirit's flame was all but snuffed out under all that pretention.

So, the Spirit moved out into the wilderness, where the air was clean and sharp, out under the stars...where the flame was fanned by the most socially unacceptable character anyone could imagine!

His breath smelling of locusts and honey, John proclaimed that someone was coming, someone so spectacular that it wasn't enough to just hang around waiting until he arrived.

It was time to get ready! Time to prepare the way, so that when that someone came, he could just walk right up to their doors, right into their hearts.

That was the good news that started with John the Baptizer! He was the messenger and that message lit him up, like a bonfire in the wilderness!

People were drawn to him, not only because of who he was and what he did and what he said, but also because of what he offered them: a chance to come clean, to stop pretending they were someone else, and to **START OVER AGAIN** with the powerful experience of Baptism underlining their new start!

There were no rules about this cleansing bath. The rabbis had not okayed it. It was just something John offered to those who came to him – even women, who were not allowed in the inner temple; even well-known sinners who would not have dreamed of trying to enter the temple. The Baptism John offered paid not attention to

the rules and requirements of the temple. Instead, John set up shop in the middle of the wilderness.

He insisted that people wake up and turn around...so that they wouldn't miss the awesome things God was doing right before their eyes!

What really strikes me about this John the Baptizer, standing knee deep in water, is that he was nowhere near the temple. And that these people who insisted on staying inside the temple, NEVER HEARD HIS MESSAGE.

Only those willing to go into the wilderness got to taste his brand of freedom. Many people met and heard and were touched by JESUS in the wilderness as well – far from the civilized center of religion. Each of us has her or his own wilderness or place: far away from what is established, ordered, predictable for us. We also have a long list of good reasons not to GO THERE.

We're comfortable where **we are**, after all in a church. We know the ropes, the way things are done, and we know we'll be taken care of. So, why should we go hunting for God anywhere else?

I don't know. I can't imagine...unless you hear a voice crying out in that wilderness. You know, the one you can't quite make out from HERE. I do know that if we only listen for God in church, we will miss half of what God is all about.

We also can't just stay in church and expect others to come. We'll miss the many people who need to experience the Good News of Jesus! **LET'S GET OUT THERE!**

Because the Good News is always beginning somewhere in the wilderness for those with ears to hear, and hearts to go...where ever the journey, the path, **the way** may lead! Amen.!