

ISAIAH 40:1-11

PSALM 85:1-2, 8-13

II PETER 3:8-15a

MARK 1:1-8

Second Sunday of Advent, Peace

December 10, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Wild Thing!

The late NFL coach Dennis Green, after being heavily critiqued following a Monday Night Football loss to the Chicago Bears in 2006, screamed into the microphone during the postgame press conference “They are who we thought they were!” This memorable rant by Green instantly became a most quotable quote, joining so many other tirades unleashed on always-suspecting sports media types. As I pondered our annual reading describing the lone wolf John the Baptizer for what seems to be the millionth time in my preaching career, suddenly I strangely thought of Green’s infamous quote from what had been a horribly played game by his Arizona Cardinals. I can hear John the Baptist now, J. T. B. screaming from his jail cell, perhaps in shackles, lamenting what he had seen with his own eyes, and now hearing all the gossip and all the rumors confirming the worst, “He is not who I thought he was!” He is not who I thought he would be! He does not do what I thought he would do, definitely not what I wanted him to do! He needs to say and do exactly like me! Let me make this simple. Say what I say! Do as I do! He is so stubborn! I have set the model, the paradigm! Peace making! Fleece making! I have been the harbinger, preparing the way that now seems like merely a way. Jesus is ruining everything, the grand scheme to overthrow the government now wasted, a pipe dream. I went to prison for this? Had he been

able, John eventually might have lamented, I lost my head over this? That must have been some exotic, erotic, table dance Salome twerked before her father Herod? Stories were abounding, swirling about, John's cousin, who had become a surprisingly instantaneous success, almost an overnight sensation, a celebrity accompanied by his own entourage as he traveled about the countryside, a real hit among the desperate peasant class who clung to his every liberating word, becoming a legend in real time as he proudly proclaimed all kinds of graciously loving, peaceful and merciful images, setting a hopeful, a kinder and gentler tone for all humanity, the hopes and dreams of all the years that human beings would be adversaries no more, that swords would be beaten into plowshares, lambs laying down with lions, and such.

For John and other zealots of likeminds, warrior prophets all, all the rabbi's musings were falling on deaf ears, Jesus' brand of prophetic words just white noise, blather tossed about, doing nothing more than interfering with the longing for insurrection, the desire for sedition, of overthrowing the suffocating indentured life endured day after day because of Roman oppression and occupation. Jesus' loyal groupies were smitten, absolutely mesmerized, he had them at hello. Yes, this newly committed and growing group of followers were gladly drinking the Kool Aid, Jesus' promises of a better, a fulfilling, an egalitarian life described in fantastic detail, highlighted by a litany of radically different characteristics, an alternative agenda. The words and actions perpetrated by John's disappointing cousin, the man from Nazareth, Jesus, were now sending mixed signals, creating a mixed message. All Jesus needed was a guitar, looking like a first century hippie, a guru or shaman. Yes, he was the epitome of a first century version of a peacenik, spinning parables, his preaching spewing what seemed like new teachings, life lessons full of Kum ba Yah nonsensical theological psychobabble. Surely it was all a masquerade! Not! What a disappointment this presumed Messianic figure had turned out to be.

Love your enemies! Turn the other cheek! Take up a cross! What happened to burning chaff and winnowing forks, judgment and wrath, and retribution. After all, as we have heard so clearly in these latter days, it is all about retribution!

While John may have never uttered those words I have for right or wrong placed in this fiery preacher's mouth, the leather belted, thong wearing, bug eater actually did lament from a jail cell, a prisoner being held by the paranoid Herod the Tetrarch, known as Herod Antipas, according to the Gospel of Matthew (11:3) "Are you the one or shall we look for another?" If those are not words of resignation and melancholy, his only companion a deeply depressed disappointment, full of his own self-fulfilled prophecy of personal doom and gloom, absorded with self-doubt with a dose of selfpity, John introspectively and retrospectively questioning his motives and his actions as he layed it all on the line, to the point it would cost him his head. He truly believed the hype that his cousin to be would be more of the same, in the long line of powerful prophets, another facsimile, a throwback, a prophetic manifestion who was a spitting image, a chip off the old block, yes, just like John himself, a carbon copy mirroring all the famous prophets of old, a reincarnation of all those who came before him. No, Jesus was an incarnation! No, Jesus was one of one! He flipped the script Jesus not only broke the mold, he was the mold! (Thank you P. Tucker). Jesus was different, radically so! Jesus was his own person, a man devoted to the way of God, a prophet who was more than a prophet, never parroting the portrayal of the onesided, one dimensional, God often, though not always, misportrayed in the Hebrew Bible as a God of anger, judgment, and vengeance. My sense is that John was driven by a fixation on the human proclivity to err, yes, to sin, that he obsessed on evil, the worst wickedness of which humanity is capable, focusing on the bad in people and not their good, forgetting that God called all creation "very good," including the likes of all human beings. The distance between justice

and judgment was a great gulf fixed, a vortex that could never begin to be crossed. No wonder John, along with so many others, was so totally confused, Jesus' meaning, message, and movement, all creating much momentum, confounding not only John, supposedly a supporter, but all the religious leaders, Scribes, Pharisees and Saducees, and the like, and no doubt many of the rank and file, the peasantry, all of whom gave him a fair hearing, the latter folks, many of whom secretly pulling for him, admiring the message and desperately wanting to cheer him on and follow the man but were too afraid of the repercussions, their anxiety and fear causing them to simply go with the traditional flow. After all, who wants to be on the bad side of the pious or the powerful, and the temple and Rome represented both. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide! And that had nothing to do with whether you had become a follower of Jesus.

Traditional or typical readings of the Bible have usually insisted that there be a certain consistency, an expectancy of a baseline uniformity, that there be no contradictions or conflicts between any biblical texts. This viewpoint comes from a naïve premise and frankly it does not even take a surface or cursory reading of the Bible to discover that the only thing consistent about its content is its inconsistency. From our limited readings about John the Baptizer it is obvious that this Essene who lived on the fringes of society, beyond the circle, the safe boundaries, was not "gentle John, meek and mild," to misquote a Christmas carol, that he indeed was a wild man, yes, a "wild thing", for those of you who recall the song. He literally raised hell on earth, his words indicting, piercing, full of wrath and vengeance, the Gospel writers describing his preaching and prophecy in graphic detail, all of which depicted words of wrathful warning, God's anger and judgment, God's impending doom, no more than a finger away from scorching the earth and all who dwell therein, annihilating every evil, every wicked, inhabitant. Like the movie Tombstone, "You, tell them I'm coming! And hell's coming with me!" Some advent sermon that

promise preaches! It is as if John starred in his own movie, "It's a Terrible Life!" He could have hosted his own TV preacher show, the consummate showman as an evangelist. Perhaps that is what it means to live the solitary life of a zealot? Maybe hanging out in the wilderness creates a warped perspective, a delusional product of one's insular surroundings, the voices in your head, the stark environment a persuasive intoxicant. The deafening silence! The haunting noises! Could it be that this is what happens when the only person with whom you can talk is yourself! Some conversation! I know that when I argue with the television I am never in doubt, never wrong! Perhaps John had developed a mental illness, a borderline or narcissistic personality disorder? It can happen living in certain isolated contexts! Perhaps the prophet hated himself, had a childhood issue? Perhaps he was as sober and sane as could be? Who knows? John paints a horrific picture, guilt-ridden, guilt-inducing, judgmentally based, far removed from the grace-based agenda that accompanied his lovingly peaceful and peacemaking, mercifully gracious cousin.

And yet, to justify the disconnect, the radical dichotomy between these two family offspring, Jesus and John, we are encouraged beyond all logic to consider John's flaming lingo to be nothing more than hyperbole, metaphorical speak belying an otherwise warm and fuzzy tone. Surely hidden but surely there! Really! Seriously! No! That dog won't hunt! That pig won't fly! As the late great Maya Angelou once declared, "When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time." It is obvious that John T. Baptist did not get the memo, that a new day was dawning, the prophecy of Isaiah from which we read today coming to pass in real time. Yes, assuming God led with a stick and not a carrot, God was now done with all the rancor and rhetoric. God was finished with the threatening vitriol, presuming God ever thought and functioned in such a childishly petulant, victimized, way in the first place. Nothing worse than being a

victim, of pretending to be wounded. Yes, the God of the Hebrew Bible is often more and more of the same, a divine sufferer who “feels” that “he” is being picked on by “his” very creation of the human kind. This God needed a quid pro quo to be appeased with sacrifice, that something, first an animal and then a human, would have to die to assuage and pacify. God created in that human image led to the perverse idea that God would kill a son, have him murdered, yes, child sacrifice, that Jesus was destined, born to become a literal sacrificial lamb! Yikes! Another sermon for another day! Lent will be here soon enough! Cry me a river! Who wants to serve and worship a God with that thin a skin, whose feelings are so easily hurt? Only a god of our human making, our own creation, would be so needy and would need to exact an ounce of flesh. **Enough nonsense from the town, I mean, wilderness crier! John is proof we did not then and do not now need an eye for an eye, that we do not always need fair and balanced! We need grace, lopsided grace! We need the pendulum to swing in one direction, the scales to tilt heavily to one side God does that! Jesus does that! The Spirit does that! We need hope! We need peace! We need joy! We need love! And we need heaping helpings of each! That is all we need!**

Thank God, Jesus proved to be unlike any and every thing John proclaimed, nothing like John promised him to be. Thank God, Jesus did not come as advertised! Thank God, Jesus came as the opposite, an absolute polarity, devoid of all the doom and gloom, despair and depression, anger and open hostility, that John assured his audience was coming. No, yes, Jesus was the essence of hope, peace, joy, and love! There was no room for anything else! Jesus was the antithesis to every bad thing imaginable, righting all the wrongs advocated by his cousin, a man I believe was sadly mistaken in the most egregious of ways. Do human beings have flaws? Of course they do! Do we fail? Do we err? Yes! Call it sin? Indeed! But there is a huge, colossal, ginormous, yes, monumental, difference between committing a sin

and being a sinner, and the Church throughout its history has failed miserably in understanding the difference. The rantings of a wild man, the wild thing, do not help in the least, in no way assuage these misconceptions with all their damaging ramifications, emotionally, mentally, psychologically, physically, spiritually. No doubt our Puritan forebears, think with me the fire and brimstone preacher Jonathan Edwards and his signature sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God,” describing in painstaking detail hopeless sinners suspended between heaven and hell by a lone spin of a spider’s web, learned well at the footstool of prophets like John, rehearsing lines that would chill the body and threaten the very soul, quenching the spirit every time. **Guilt has been the Trojan Horse, the driving force for bad theology throughout much of the history of the Church, Catholic, Protestant, and every aberration, every mutation, and thank God, every creation, in between. Covering in fear that is lacking faith serves no one or no good! Thank God, a new day has dawned and that day sprang forth with the birth, the life, and the death of the one raised to raise the bar among us, reminding us of the high standard of loving God, neighbor, and self, to put love into the center, the core of everything, right smack dab into the midst of all our human being and doing. Too bad, much of the world never got the loving memo, and still does not to this day. We can all count the ways! Or, simply and stubbornly refuse it, turning away from Jesus’ universally appealing precious gifts. Our global village could be so much better, new and improved, not if we all got saved—we do not need a revival meeting—but rather if we all chose to follow the pathways ordered in the steps of Jesus instead. Better to tiptoe through the tulips of unlimited grace than to traipse through the trenches of our own self-fulfilled prophecies of doom and damnation!**

Yes, Jesus was truly counter intuitive, counter cultural, coming to counter every narrative put forth by any prophet trafficking in judgment bordering on hate speech, including the propaganda of his

own rebellious cousin, all of which was steeped in the rhetoric of what horrible, miserable, wretched wretches we all are, sinful to the core. Jesus saw the good in every person and that is the way he engaged them when he met them. Yes, Jesus suggested a better way, considered the only way, the truth, and the abundant life, the loving life, for those who were living diminished lives, those who lived the worst ways imaginable, enduring the worst human conditions. Yes, Jesus condemned bad behavior whenever he saw it or experienced it, with whomever he encountered and engaged, but he never condemned anyone, always hoped for redemption and reconciliation, yes, restoration and reformation, and all these blessed gifts all at the same time. Yes, his yoke is easy and his burden light, but yes, there is a cross. Okay, give Jesus a few percentage points of John's persona! Just a tad, a smidge, just enough! So maybe Jesus had a small percentage of his cousin John in him after all! Jesus was a lover, not a fighter, a lover, not an accuser. John was a fighter who wanted to pick one, with everybody! Yes, John was a radicalized zealot! So, how did Jesus answer John's question from a prison cell, a question for the ages indeed, put to the rabbi through John's disciples, "Are you the one or shall we look for another?" Jesus simply replied, letting his deeds address this profound inquiry, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." John, were you listening? Are we? Literal and metaphorical, these indeed are the words of eternal life.

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains comes to us bringing grace, grace upon grace in hope, peace, joy, and love!
Amen and amen.