

1/7/24 Sermon

Mark 1:4-11

The writer of Mark's Gospel leap frogged over the nativity story; added 30 years to Jesus's age; and then landed Jesus in the middle of the Jordan River. This writer of Mark gets to the point and that point is ultimately the Resurrection.

Mark's gospel begins when Jesus is first coming onto the scene to begin his work.

A new beginning is about to happen as we face a new year. There had been Old Testament prophets for years foretelling the coming of the Lord— Isaiah, Daniel, Joel, Amos, Jonah and many more.

And who do we have as the New Testament prophet? The last prophet of a long line of foretellers. John the prophet, he was the real deal, and will complete the story of God's revelation.

The Genesis reading this morning, speaks of familiar contrasts: day/night, evening/morning, earth/sky, etc. The bible uses many contrasting characters and illustrations to make a point. Contrasts are embraced, all are welcome.

It is easy to imagine the stark contrast between John and Jesus.

My ten year old bible scholar grandson pointed to the Old Testament story of brothers Esau and Jacob, they shared a similar dissimilarity of dress and hygiene to John and Jesus.

John, a strapping big guy comes out of the wilderness, disheveled long hair, goofy, and displayed weird compulsive behavior. I imagine John's appearance is a companion to the legendary Yeti—hairy, smelly, and a bit obsessive; or imagine John wearing the long furry coat that Ken wore in the recent "Barbie" movie.

John's attire is similar to Elijah's description in the Old Testament— "a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist."

The New Testament is normally not known for detailed clothing descriptions. And here it is: a detailed account of John's clothing: a camel hair vest, a leather belt around the waist, and sandals. The description could have been written by a fashion editor describing models on a Galilean fashion runway or an article in an ancient Vogue magazine.

Our advent readings told the story of the angel announcing to the elder Elizabeth that she was carrying a child in her womb. John the baptizer is that son Elizabeth bore. Jesus and John are cousins and although the two were born just months apart, I don't think we could get a more unlikely pair in appearance and personality traits.

Now an adult, John is the last of the prophets. The real thing is about to happen: the manifestation of Jesus. John prepared the way for Jesus, just as a farmer prepares the soil to produce fertile abundant crops.

John could certainly gather people, not for a fashion show, but for a crowd of people who repented and asked that their sins be forgiven, and asking that John baptize them with the Jordan water. John the Baptizer is an action verb, an action figure. John's prophecy had prepared the way for Jesus.

Physical and clothing descriptions of Jesus in the bible are minimal. The bible shows that Jesus is a confident, compassionate, gentle, humble, quiet teacher dressed in flowing white robe and sandals.

Most of our Jesus images come from Renaissance paintings.

I am not saying that Jesus was a wus or a wimp, compared to John. Jesus' strength, teachings and wisdom, lie in his holy presence and truth. Jesus is The Truth.

Jesus was just coming on the scene. He appeared at the Jordan out of nowhere as the community gathered around John to repent their sins and to be baptized in the Jordan water.

The river plays a vital role in the Old and New Testaments. The River Jordan witnessed many miracles, it was considered living water and later Jesus's disciples would be baptized in the River Jordan.

A geographical fact; the elevation of the Jordan River is the lowest river in the world and descends to the Dead Sea. The word Jordan means "deep river."

Despite John's outward behavior and appearance, John was loyal, obedient, and humble to his cousin Jesus. John doesn't think Jesus needs to be baptized. Jesus is without sin. I imagine the conversation going like this: "moi" you want me to baptize you?

You should be baptizing me, I with sin and in need of repentance." A convivial argument ensues. "No I am not worthy" "Yes you are." "No I'm not."

It reminds me of my four year old son Brad and his best friend Dave. At the end of their favorite game—Candy Land, I heard them from the kitchen quietly arguing, "You won! "No, You won, I didn't win," "You did." And so on, until they agreed that they both won. Forty years later, they are still as kind now as then.

Jesus won the debate. John relented and Jesus was baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was born into a rural culture that was tethered to the ground, life was tenuous for the Palestinians. The severity of basic survival created perpetual fear and uncertainty.

Fear. Fear is fertile ground for anxiety and anxiety leads to irrational thoughts, illogical reasoning, and unfounded beliefs. An anxious mind becomes rigid, concrete, polarized and lacks curiosity and creativity. Thinking becomes black or white; either/or, good/bad. Today we are experiencing a polarized, black or white, good/bad, plague.

Anxiety is contagious. The spread of emotion from one person to another is called *social contagion*. Judson Brewer, psychologist and neuroscientist, writes in his book

Unwinding Anxiety\* that “we can be cued/triggered by simply talking to someone else who is anxious. Their fearful words are like a sneeze landing directly on our brains, emotionally infecting our Prefrontal Cortex. Anxiety is as contagious as Covid.”

We live in anxious times. What will 2024 bring us? Peace? More war? Starvation? Severe weather patterns? Many people in this world have a lot to dread and reasons to be angry and anxious.

And here in our private lives, we may suffer from our own individual anxieties: finances, health, friendships, relationships.

We do our best thinking and problem solving when our brain and body are not encased in stress, worry, or a cluttered mess of irrational thoughts. Anxiety allows no room for curiosity, creativity, or problem solving. We get stuck.

Uncluttered brains that are open and wide invite and welcome a procession of thoughts, new ideas, and moments of inspiration. Our brains become a playground of wonder, contrasts, and possibilities. How many unnoticed and disregarded epiphany opportunities have been lost because we are gazing at our iPhones or computers?

Occasionally, after a good night’s sleep, we wake up with a clear insight, or solution to a problem we may have never even known it was a problem. Our mind wants to be efficient, if only fear step aside and we tolerate uncertainty. Epiphanies can come from anywhere and anytime—if we pay attention. I have had some minor epiphanies while walking alone; strolling in the woods; daydreaming; and in the ‘zone’ or the ‘flow’ while gardening. We have examples of math epiphanies, Darwin is a good example; music epiphanies; literary enlightenments; and so on.

Not all epiphanies are comforting, we can have insights into childhood or situations that reveal a truth that can eventually set us free.

My favorite example of a secular epiphany is the Far Side Page a Day desk calendar. Most times I can get the “punny” joke. The most memorable cartoons are the ones I

don't get at first. I look at it with sparse understanding, a blank look, no recognizable pun. I search for clues on the 6 inch square drawing.

I most treasure the ones that are so subtle it takes me awhile to figure it out. And some days, I just don't get it. For those, I don't find any humor in the cartoon and can't hide my disappointment in Gary Larson's renowned craft. I put the page away with a shrug, empty humor, and I looked forward to the next day's drawing and script.

The cartoon that really disappointed and perplexed me happened to show up again a few calendar years later. I remembered not finding any satisfying humor until I spied the partial drawing of a large horse on the edge of the page that explained the whole scenario. Oh my goodness, an epiphany! I couldn't unsee it, it made total sense....now. My lack of perception and not knowing made me all the more curious. When I finally got the picture I questioned how I ever missed something so obvious. We can miss cues and information so obvious, we almost trip over them

Jesus epitomizes an open mind, remember the verse "Do not be anxious about anything" ? Jesus brought a calm and serene environment to an otherwise anxious and rigid society. We can comprehend his precious metaphors and his parables within an open perspective. We see with new eyes.

I wonder if this is how the community of repenters felt when they realized that this is what prophets were expecting for years.

Epiphanies are on a continuum, not all epiphanies are equal or measurable. One person's epiphany is another person's ho-hum ordinary. Except for The Epiphany. There is nothing "ho-hum" about the revelation of Jesus that occurred at the Jordan. We have never lived without the revelation of Jesus, Jesus has always been in our lifetime and our ancestor's lifetimes. The people standing in the living waters of Jordan were ready for repentance and forgiveness of their sins and The Epiphany was beyond their wildest dreams.