

Call of the Wildman
Mark 1:4-11
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Sunday nights are usually my time to veg out in front of the TV after a long day of work, and recently – don't ask me how – I've ended up watching Animal Planet. And I have to say...it's pretty cool! The first show I got hooked on, so to speak, was "Hillbilly Handfishing," where these two good ol' boys take city slickers on noodling expeditions and teach them to catch catfish with their bare hands. This is too good to make up! Leigh would walk in the room and say, "What are you watching???"

The newest show I'm enjoying actually features a man from Lebanon, Ky., named Ernie Brown Jr., who catches snapping turtles with his bare hands, or at least what's left of his bare hands. The show is "Call of the Wildman." With his quirky demeanor and ear-piercing battle yelp, the Turtle Man has made quite a name for himself. But he's not necessarily the guy you want your daughter to bring home on a date, unless you really like turtle soup.

That description of the Turtle Man could apply to our wild man in today's scripture passage. John the Baptist was also a man who was making quite a name for himself, both for his demeanor and for what he was doing out there in the wilderness. As Mark tells us, people were flocking to hear the call of this wild man.

Of course, in true Mark fashion, that's about all that he tells us. This is by far the shortest of the gospels, and Mark uses an economy of words to advance his narrative. He introduces John the Baptist and Jesus, has Jesus baptized, sends him the wilderness to be tempted for 40 days and starts Jesus on his preaching ministry – all in the fifteen verses.

Mark tends to focus more on actions than on words. Because he isn't especially verbose in his writing, it behooves us to pay special attention to what he does say and what he leaves out. For example, you won't find any shepherds or wise men or swaddling cloths in Mark. He forgoes the birth story and instead jumps right into the action. But interestingly, he doesn't start with Jesus. Instead, he starts with the wild man we know as John the Baptist.

Actually, Mark starts with a Hebrew prophet, quoting Isaiah's prophecy about the coming of the messenger who will tell of the Lord's imminent arrival. This introduction to John is important because it helps us understand more about John's ministry. We know that John is Jesus' cousin, the child of Elizabeth and Zechariah who would have been a few months older than Jesus. But other than that information, for someone so prominent in the gospel story, John is a bit of a mystery.

Therefore, the prophetic introduction is important. At this time in Israel's history, it had been about 400 years since they'd had a flesh-and-blood prophet in their midst, and you tend to forget things after 400 years. The Israelites had been passing down the stories and writings of the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, but after 400 years you begin to wonder if any of their prophecies about the coming of the Messiah would ever come true. And then this guy John comes out of nowhere, looking and acting and talking like an honest-to-goodness prophet. He wore the same kind of clothes, had the same kind of diet and – maybe most importantly – worked in the same kind of environment.

Mark's first words about John say, "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness." That is a statement fraught with meaning, because the wilderness had played a significant role in Israel's history. The wilderness often signified God's presence, much like the mountaintop will do in the

New Testament. Moses, David and Elijah all flee to the wilderness, and often a Hebrew prophet would spend time in the wilderness and then return with a word from the Lord. We often think of the wilderness as symbolizing a time of trial or hardship, and that can certainly be the case. But the wilderness could also very well be where we find God.

So you see why it's significant that John appears in the wilderness. He doesn't come from the Temple, the seat of Jewish religious authority. He doesn't come from Rome, the home of the emperor. He comes from the wilderness, bringing with him an anti-establishment message of judgment and hope. And it's a message that people who had been waiting 400 years were desperate to hear.

John isn't only preaching about the coming of the Lord. This wild man is spending a lot of time in the muddy waters of the Jordan, but he's not looking for snapping turtles. He's baptizing people. Now we tend to think baptism is a strictly Christian ritual, but there are deep Jewish roots in the idea of performing cleansing rituals. Jews knew about ritual washing as a way of dealing with uncleanness and defilement, and baptism was also used as a way of initiating converts into Judaism by symbolically cleansing their souls.

But John wasn't only baptizing the unclean or the newly converted. He was baptizing everybody! Don't stand still too long around John, you might get dunked. The radical message he was preaching was that everyone – new Jew, old Jew, non-Jew – was unclean and that everyone needed to be cleansed through baptism. Paul will continue this theme later when he writes in Romans that “all have sinned and all have fallen short of the glory of God.” Doesn't matter whether you're a Pharisee or tax collector, life-long believer or brand-new seeker. We all have something of which we need to be cleansed.

Why? What's John's purpose for insisting on baptism for everyone? Because John knew that someone was coming, someone so much greater than him, and he wanted to make sure everyone was ready to receive him. He wanted people to do everything in their power to prepare the way for the Lord to walk into their lives and into their hearts. And he knew that such preparation starts with some spiritual house-cleaning.

Mark tells us that John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The Greek word for “repentance” is “metanoia,” which literally means a reversal or turning around. That's the idea behind New Year's resolutions, isn't it? We don't make resolutions to keep doing what we're doing. “I resolve this year to get less exercise and keep gaining weight.” No, we make resolutions to turn around something in our lives that isn't working, to reverse attitudes and behaviors that are producing sour fruit.

The point John is making is that until we make these spiritual resolutions, we aren't prepared to receive the one who has come and is coming. And preparation takes work. When I taught public speaking, I preached the importance of being prepared. And I could always tell the students who had prepared and those who hadn't, usually by how much they were sweating. Any effort or project of significance requires preparation, and preparation takes work, but a lot of times people don't want to do the work because they think they don't have to do it. That's the bad kind of pride, to which we are all susceptible..

If anyone had reason to be full of pride, it was John. In a time when the Israelites were pinched under the thumb of the Roman empire, wandering in their own spiritual wilderness, John single-handedly restores their hope in God and their belief in God's promises. John was drawing audiences from the whole Judean countryside and all over Jerusalem. He was preaching and baptizing and changing lives. He was Jesus' cousin, for goodness sakes! He was the closest thing Israel had to a camel-hair-wearing rock star.

And yet, he knew that the work he was doing was only a pre-cursor to what was coming. Anybody could be baptized on the outside. If you have some water and a willing participant, anyone can go through the outward ritual of baptism. But Jesus was bringing something different, an inward baptism, a soul cleansing, and it's only going to work if the people start turning around from their sinful ways and clearing room in their hearts for Christ.

Is there room? Is there room in us for the peace and grace and purpose Jesus is offering? Of course there is, we think. Those other things don't take up that much space! But when you start to think about the things that keep us separate from God – our negative feelings towards another person, our selfish belief that we don't have to share, our liberal use of situational ethics – you realize that those things can take up a lot of space and attention and energy. Is there room?

Whenever we're going to have guests at our house, the whole place gets a good cleaning. Except that one room. You know that room? It's that room where you throw everything from all the other rooms and then close the door. Every house has one of those rooms. But what John says is, yes, even THAT room has to be clean in order for us to receive Christ as a guest. I find it funny that often times people will complain that they feel like God isn't speaking to them when in reality they're not prepared for that. They haven't done their house-cleaning, the hard work of repentance. They want what Deitrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace," which is all the benefits of faith without any of the repentance.

As we move into this new year, it's a good time to make resolutions, but not the ones we'll break next week or tomorrow or this afternoon. What's a spiritual resolution we could make today, a metanoia moment when we promise to clear some space for Jesus? It doesn't have to be anything big. We can always start with a few dust bunnies in the corner of our soul. But we have to start somewhere! We have to do the work of repentance, of turning around, if we want to receive Jesus. Let us prepare the way for the Lord to come into our hearts and our lives this year. There's a Buddhist saying: When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear. Are we ready?