

Country Boy

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

I expect that many of you know me well enough by now to recognize that I am not a city person. Despite the fact that I’ve worked in New York City for nearly three decades now, I much prefer the country life. Give me big skies and wide open spaces rather than the concrete canyons of Manhattan.

I grew up in what people on the coasts dismissively refer to as flyover country, places like Iowa and Nebraska, Minnesota, Illinois and

Michigan. Those of you who know me *really* well know that my spiritual home is even further west: the Big Sky country of Montana, the Tetons of Wyoming and the azure skies and crenelated landscape of New Mexico. Some day, in the not-too-distant future, I hope to decamp to the West for much longer stretches of time than I can now afford.

One of the birthrights of people who live in places other than the coasts is a gnawing suspicion that their opinions don't really matter, that no one is paying much attention to them or to their concerns. All of the pundits, after all, are clustered in New York and Washington, with perhaps a few more in California and a couple in Atlanta. The cable networks are located not in Kansas or Louisiana or Oregon but in New York and Washington and Atlanta. I've often wondered how our collective perception of America would change if news organizations would open bureaus in Bozeman, Montana, or Hinton, West Virginia.

But if you hail from places like Jefferson, Iowa, or Iron Mountain, Michigan, or even Windsor, Vermont, not many people care what you think or pay attention to what you wear. You're not exactly a trendsetter or a style maven.

Which is why I'm so intrigued by John the Baptist or, in today's translation, John the baptizer. St. Mark elects to begin his entire narrative of Jesus' life with John the Baptist. He even takes the trouble to describe his appearance: "Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey."

Let's play with that image a bit. Here comes John, just returned from a hiking trip in the Porcupine Mountains – now, see, no one here even knows where the Porcupine Mountains are, do you?

John has just returned from hiking the Porcupine Mountains. He's disheveled. His hair is dirty and pulled back into a pony tail. He's got several days growth of beard. He's wearing sandals, an old North Face polar-fleece anorak and frayed hiking shorts. He's digging fistfuls of trail mix out of a paper bag and throwing them into his mouth. He chews with his mouth open, and, after a week of hiking, he doesn't smell all that great.

But the people flock to this man, this creature from the wilderness, and he baptizes them. Great numbers of people are drawn to John the Baptist, and he dunks them in the river. And then John the baptizer starts to talk about another man, this chap called Jesus. "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie his Birkenstocks," John says. "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

I love the fact that Mark begins his Gospel with John the Baptist. You would expect that any important development in first-century Palestine would emanate from Jerusalem – or Rome, I suppose – with Wolf Blitzer and Diane Sawyer and Brian Williams there to cover every detail and new development. The cable channel would flash "Breaking News" in a crawl across the bottom of the screen: "Source informs CNN that Jesus is about to appear." Chris Matthews would weigh in, and E. J. Dionne and David Brooks would provide commentary on NPR. Stephen Colbert would find something amusing to say about John the Baptist, this wild-looking man from the hinterlands.

Jerusalem was where you expected such developments, not the desert or the wilderness. But Mark begins his telling of the epic story of Jesus with John the Baptist, this wild man in hiking shorts, with unruly hair, just arrived from the wilderness.

And what does that mean for us? The good news of the gospel, the coming of Jesus, is that it is for us. All of us, ordinary people that we are. Jesus did not come only for the high and mighty, the famous, the elite, the well connected, those whose faces show up on the covers of the tabloids and the magazines in the checkout aisles.

The gospel is for all of us, even those in flyover country. Jesus came not from Jerusalem but from the margins, which I'm guessing is why he expressed such concern for those he called "the least of these." I can't imagine beginnings more humble than a stable in Bethlehem. And his coming was heralded not on *Entertainment Tonight* or the society page of the *New York Times* but by a wild man just returned from the desert.

Mark's Gospel reminds us that the good news is for all of us. No one plays second fiddle in the kingdom of God. The gospel is for everyone.

Second Sunday of Advent

December 4, 2011

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut