

*Turning From Shadow into Light*

*Mark 1:1-8*

Second Sunday of Advent, December 4, 2011

Whitefish United Methodist Church

- ✦ *Tale as old as time, tune as old as song, bittersweet and strange, finding you can change, learning you were wrong. Tale as old as time, song as old as rhyme, Beauty and the Beast.*
- ✦ So goes a verse sung by Angela Lansbury as the teapot in Disney's rendition of Beauty and the Beast. Most of us with children in our lives know that version of the ancient fairy tale.
- ✦ Although there are many variations of it, several elements are consistent. There's a beautiful, gentle, compassionate daughter, and a dedicated father, and a beast who is ugly on the outside and frightening to boot. The father loses everything, is captured by the beast who will only release him if he gives the beast the beautiful daughter.
- ✦ The beauty, the daughter, decides to save her father by going to the castle and living with the beast. The beast falls in love with the daughter and amazingly, the daughter with him. At the moment of their embrace, the beast is transformed into a handsome young prince.
- ✦ The beast had been under a spell. He had to be loved as a beast before he could become his true self.
- ✦ The week before Thanksgiving I went to visit my mother, and I took her out of the locked assisted living facility where she lives into the world. Every time I do this, I find myself saying, a little desperately, some version of: "If only you could have known her when she was an

- accomplished, stylish, competent family therapist—she was really something!” People regard me with pity or understanding.
- ✦ These moments haunt me, because somehow I know that people don’t really see her when they look at her—they see only an elderly woman, frail and spent. Now that I am getting older, I sometimes think people are beginning to see me that way, too, and I wish that younger people could see me for who I really am, too—“If they could only know me, they would like me!” Or would they?
  - ✦ “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” So begins Mark’s gospel. And so we settle back at these words to hear the wonderful story of the birth of Jesus, of dreams of Mary and Joseph, of Simeon’s being struck dumb, of the announcement of the angels, of the glorious poetic words of John’s gospel...In the beginning was the Word....
  - ✦ But wait. No amazing and sweet birth stories here in Mark, considered by most scholars to be the oldest of the gospels, written around 70 A.D. Just the words of the prophet Isaiah about a strange messenger in the wilderness crying out to the people to repent, to seek forgiveness for their sins.
  - ✦ All Mark offers is this John the Baptizer—Martha Stewart’s worst nightmare—smelling like a camel and hollering at people to change their ways. You want to talk about a beastly intrusion into Christmas preparation—here’s one!
  - ✦ It’s like the beginning of an avant-garde movie, instead of the good news of Jesus Christ. Something new and unexpected is happening. We are being told, no warned, really, of the coming presence of God.

- ✦ Let's start with the setting of the story. John appears in the wilderness. And this is important at many levels. First, John is not part of the power structure or establishment of Jerusalem. He is from out in left field, so to speak.
- ✦ But there is also a deep psychological meaning to this setting, too. Because the wilderness is the symbol of the unconscious self. The wilderness is unknown, uncharted, untested. People don't live in the wilderness.
- ✦ It is full of wild animals, dangerous places. The wilderness is scary, and unpredictable. It isn't a place normal people go to, at least voluntarily.
- ✦ So in terms of our inner lives, the wilderness represents those parts of ourselves that we aren't familiar with, that may scare us, that we reject, and that we don't like. The psychic wilderness may be a place of anger, feelings of rejection, or incompetence.
- ✦ The wilderness contains a lot of the stuff in our psychological closet, the place where we stuff all the issues and feelings we've never quite dealt with or resolved. This is not our public persona we use in our everyday life; it is our shadow self.
- ✦ But this messenger, John, comes from the wilderness, this scary place no one wants to go. And yet this messenger is from God. Mark quotes Isaiah saying that this voice, John, comes to prepare the way for God.
- ✦ Yet we want to deal with God in the safe places. At least I sure do. I want to meet God where I am comfortable, in a good space, when I have the time to think about things, decide how to respond. This is when and where I want to hear that God is coming.

- ✦ And yet this messenger of God isn't coming to my safe place. In other words, when I am tired, angry, discouraged, forced to deal with issues I would rather avoid, when I am in the wilderness, that is when John the Baptist pops up and says "hello, guess what, God is coming."
- ✦ John appears in the wilderness, but where do the people meet him? *"And the people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people from Jerusalem were going out to him."* All the people are going out into the wilderness.
- ✦ On a literal level, this would have been scary enough—no maps, wild animals, this strange dude who hasn't bathed since Caesar began to reign. But how much more fearful when the wilderness is internal. This messenger from God calls us to go straight to the place we would rather not go.
- ✦ If there were a map of our internal wilderness, you can imagine what it would list: the lands of insecurity, excessive control, unresolved family issues, abuse, passive-aggressive behavior, anger, resentment, despair, and on and on. Each of our maps would be different, personal to us. But they are all the things we hope will go away by themselves if we just ignore them long enough. If we just cover them up well enough.
- ✦ The people go out to this dangerous place because, John, the messenger, preaches a baptism for the repentance of sins. As if going to the wilderness were not enough, John asks them to immerse themselves in the water, to be completely swallowed up, engulfed by the unconscious—to die to the old self, to let it go, so that something new can be born.

- ✦ Psychologically this means opening ourselves to a completely new life by trusting that God will be with us in the place of death to the old. In submitting ourselves to this wilderness baptism, we allow ourselves to die to our sense of control, our illusion that we are in charge and can determine our own fate.
- ✦ In short, we submit to the coming of God in our lives in a whole new way. This baptism is for the repentance of sins, in Greek, metanoia. The Jungian psychologist John Sanford sees repentance as a turning away from the outer masks we identify with and turning inward to face our inner adversary.
- ✦ Sometimes we need that outer mask. After all, we can't dump our inner junk on just anyone at anytime. But the problem comes when we ourselves can't distinguish our mask from the person we really are. We can't admit that there are parts of ourselves that don't measure up to our public selves.
- ✦ And so we can't repent of our sins—our self-deception, our hopelessness, our—you fill in the blank—by sheer force of will. Because that won't work. Instead we have to look inward, to face the parts of ourselves that lead us to those actions and then ask God to heal them and integrate them into the wholeness that God desires for us.
- ✦ As Christians, we do that through grace, through submitting to God, not through our own egotistical sense of control. And this is the beginning of salvation.
- ✦ And so I ask you—I ask myself—as the darkness comes earlier and earlier outside, as the winter hardens outside and in, are we willing to

enter into the wilderness with John to prepare the way for the coming of God again in us?

- ✦ Take a moment to imagine that desert place. There are no roads there, it is deserted, still. Then in the distance, you realize there is a river and people are there. You start walking toward it. Pretty soon you see a wild man dressed in odd clothing and he is talking to the people. You go closer, on the edge of the crowd by the river.
- ✦ Suddenly the strange man looks straight at you, singling you out from the crowd. Looking straight at you, he seems to be looking into your heart. And he says, “confess your sins and be baptized.” What would you do?
- ✦ Would write him off as a nutcase? Would you go back to making your mental Christmas list? Or would you offer up your deepest wounds and fears to the river of God that beckons you?
- ✦ After all, the choice is yours.
- ✦ In Advent, a coming is promised (that’s what advent literally means.) A birth is about to happen. And we have to listen to what is coming, and we have to respond.
- ✦ This Thanksgiving, Tom and I celebrated with our son and daughter-in-law. She is beautifully pregnant, but I am not sure they really know how much their lives will soon change. As you who have children know, after a birth, your life will never be the same. When we look at these scriptures with new vision, we will also have to deal with what it will mean to bear God in our lives—our inner and our outer selves.
- ✦ And in typical gospel fashion, we have here a paradox. The coming of God in our inner life may be simultaneously subtle, unpredictable,

- cataclysmic, and judgmental. The eruption of God in our lives is very personal—it will be different for each of us.
- ✦ Some big event may happen, like the loss of a loved one or the birth of a child, to make us look at our life differently. Or maybe you just have a conversation with someone that helps you see things differently.
  - ✦ A couple of weeks ago I took my mother to the dentist (who is a saint if ever one walked the earth). While waiting for her appointment, she picked up a Time magazine and thumbed through it, seemingly just going through the motions. Then she came upon an article titled “The Art of War.” She exclaimed in a loud, horrified voice—“Debbie, war is not an art—it’s terrible!”
  - ✦ We’ve become so accustomed to these long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that we’ve become hardened to their effects. It took my mother (in her former life a conservative hawk politically) to get me to wake up to how upside down our attitudes to war have become.
  - ✦ Whether the change is a turning point that clearly looks like a crisis, or is an innocuous change that will take a while to reveal its impact, these are moments when God enters our life in a new way. And if we pay attention and respond to what is happening, nothing will ever be the same because of this manifestation of God in our lives.
  - ✦ And we don’t know when this will happen—we can’t predict it, as the scripture reminds us. God will not be contained, and God acts in God’s time. This coming of God in our inner world does not happen when it’s convenient, when we have time, when our life is in order, when the kids are grown or we finally have all the answers.

- ✦ The scriptures of Advent remind us that God’s schedule is not ours. And so we are reminded to keep awake. We don’t know when God will break into our lives and demand a response from us. We all have a choice whether to respond or not, to stay awake or not.
- ✦ The whole advent theme is the angel’s word to Mary, to Joseph, to the shepherds, to Elizabeth: “FEAR NOT!”
- ✦ And that’s the heart of the problem—we are afraid of that inner self, afraid to love the beast that we would rather run away from.
- ✦ But what is the love that Jesus talks about? It is the love that says “I love that which is unlovable.” It’s talking about loving the beastliness in you and me and in our world and transforming it into the self we are meant to be, the world we are meant to be.
- ✦ Some of us live lives of “quiet desperation” because we are afraid somebody will find out what a beast we are inside. But God knows that, and God adores and embraces you and our world in your and our beastliness, just the way we are.
- ✦ That’s what it’s all about. But if you don’t pay attention, if you don’t own the broken, beastly places, you’re living in a fantasyland with the illusion of control. You are not yet real about who you are or the enormous love God has for you and for other beastly people.
- ✦ *Beauty and the Beast*. It’s a funny fairy tale that on the surface doesn’t have much to do with advent. Yet this advent season, God calls us to welcome the love that is so transforming, that when you claim it, when you own it, the beastly part of you and our world will be redeemed and transformed and embraced by God, and you will move from shadow into light.

- ✦ And that's the best gift anyone could ask for. It is the gift that creates all the good news of the gospel. And it's just the beginning. Amidst this season of gifts and preparation, may we awaken to the birth of God in our lives, in our world—may we enter the wilderness with courage, hope, and the confidence that God is with us.
- ✦ Just as Jesus did on the night he gave himself up for us....