

His Bark is Worse Than His Bite

[Texts -Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8]

Pastor Dave Shackle

December 7, 2014

When some people reflect on John the Baptist's mission to "Prepare the way of the Lord," they envision technique being similar to that of a bull in a china shop, or a bulldozer on steroids! If every valley needs to be raised-up and every mountain and hill made low, then it's gong to take some brute force and high powered punch to get the job done. And who better than John the Baptist to provide the muscle? John's hard-hitting message, is one of *repentance*; and for some Christians, that word carries a run-'em-over, knock-'em-down kind of quality. "Repent or Perish" / "Turn or Burn" / "Convert to Christ or be devoured by the devil!" That's how some people expect a prophetic message to sound - a word of woeful judgment and impending devastation. I suppose that's why the term "prophet of doom" is far more familiar than the term "prophet of hope!" And that's why this image of John the Baptist "Preparing the Way of the Lord" in a fierce and fiery manner seems credible to people today, and why many preachers still to perpetuate that sharp-edged fear-driven approach.

There are those, who "in the name of the Lord" actually seem to relish running roughshod over people, and putting-down anyone who stands in their way.

"You're not a Christian? Then you're going to hell."

"You say you *are* a Christian, but haven't been immersed in believer's baptism? Then you are destined for damnation!"

"You're gay and you want to serve God? Then you better straighten-up, sister, or get ready to get run-over! And you don't believe in my Biblical interpretation of how God works and who God accepts, then prepare to be pulverized, because I'm preparing the Way of the Lord!"

The primary problem with that kind of brutal approach to "Clearing the Way for Christ" is that those who employ such tactics actually end up hindering the very thing they claim to promote. Even though John the Baptist and many of the prophets of old declare a decisive message of

repentance, they never declare that it's God's intention to knock-down or annihilate those who are already battered or beaten. Now, the prophets do have some scathing words for those who are self-righteously judgmental; as well as for those who use their power or position to attack, abuse, or take advantage of others. But a genuine Prophet of God - first and foremost - seeks justice, shows mercy, and stands with those vulnerable people who need help and support.

By all accounts, John the Baptist was a formidable and fiery figure. With that diet of locusts and wild honey, and that camel hair coat-thing he had going, he probably did seem a bit barbaric! Yet even rough and rugged John didn't go out of his way to attack people with his message of repentance. To the contrary, people actually came looking for him. All kinds of people - from the Judean countryside, to the city of Jerusalem - were drawn to this impressive and imposing prophet. They went into the wilderness to receive from John a baptismal cleansing, and to soak-in his message of repentance and forgiveness, redemption and *hope!*

The way that John "Prepares the Way of the Lord" is by calling all those who need to, to turn-away from their unhealthy and destructive way of living. And then, he points them toward the Salvation of God - God's saving Presence which is found in the person of Jesus Christ. John certainly didn't want himself, or his methods, to become an obstacle to those seeking the Christ. So at the opportune moment, he humbly steps aside, so that people can have clear access the Christ who now stands among them. John is not a bully, or a bull in a china shop - tossing the "bad" people out of Christ's way. He is an inspiring and encouraging guide, who invites all people to prepare their hearts and lives for Christ's gracious and loving Presence.

Jesus Christ, this Messiah to whom John points, is one who will turn this world's understanding of power and greatness completely upside-down. As the Christ - as God's Anointed One - Jesus establishes his Lordship, by humbly serving other people. He lifts-up the lowly and champions the oppressed; he touches society's "untouchable" lepers, with compassion and wholeness; he even is willing to wash the feet of

his followers - including those who will betray, deny, and desert him. And when presented with the opportunity to back-off from his inclusive message of grace, and save his own skin, Jesus chooses to stand in solidarity with us sinners - Trusting that his Divine, Life-giving Source will honor that choice, and transform his death into a gateway to new and everlasting life. *This* is “The Way of the Lord!” And it’s the same pathway to full and meaningful life which you and I are now called to follow.

In order for us to do so, repentance may well be needed - not only by those whose lives are obviously on the wrong track, but also by those who think it’s O.K. to bully others with their oppressive religious rules. The call to *repent* - to make a radical change in the way we approach Life - is still an extremely viable message, regardless of how that word has been misused as a Biblical battering ram. To *re-pent* literally means to “turn again” - to change our direction, whenever we recognize that our behaviors, our priorities, or our lives are off-target from that which is good and true and wholesome. Therefore, repentance can be a truly liberating and Life-enhancing experience!

For example, if you or I find that our relationships are damaged, dysfunctional, or destructive, then we should *want* to repent - to somehow turn those relationships around. If our faith is floundering and lifeless, yet we want it to be passionate and alive, then repentance is clearly in order. However, just as it’s important that we don’t let others beat us down with a heavy-handed call to “repent”, it’s equally important that we don’t beat ourselves-up in our own efforts to repent and to change. The call to repentance *can* have a sharp and urgent tone; but it should also be tempered with a spirit of genuine grace and compassion.

The process of repentance offers us a fresh start in the way we live, the way we love, the way we relate to God and to one another. And though the way of repentance is not an easy one, it’s certainly a worthwhile path to pursue. It is a journey that is essentially traveled by *faith* - by trusting that our Divine Creative Source truly does love us, and wants us to do well in our lives. Now, “doing well” doesn’t mean

that we will have great riches, or power, or fame. It means that we will *do well* - by helping those in need, by standing-up for the underdog, and by treating every person we meet with fairness, kindness, and compassion.

Today, you and I, like John the Baptist, have the fantastic opportunity to help "Prepare the Way of the Lord" - not by running people over, but by lifting them up and encouraging them to also *do well* in *their* lives. And perhaps the best and easiest way you and I can do this, is by showing them the Divine Love and Grace that we ourselves have already experienced, and joyfully inviting them to share it with us. To check-out our Church! To experience this warm and welcoming community of faith. To come and join us on this remarkable journey of repentance and forgiveness, hope and love.