

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

December 4, 2011

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. Amen!

The prayer that we've just prayed together is a prayer for mission and inclusivity for all of God's people. Here at Christ Church in Montpelier, we have embraced and ratified the following statement of inclusion that is reflective of this community's belief that every person is a child of God and as such deserves honor, respect, and dignity. The following statement is a direct quotation that is taken from our Christ Church website:

"Christ Church is a Christian faith community that affirms that every person has worth as a unique creation made in the image of God. We recognize, celebrate and give thanks for the many diverse gifts of God among us, and we believe that all acts of exclusion are inconsistent with Christ's teaching.

Further, as a faith community, we take seriously our mission of inclusion, and we delight in extending a welcome into our faith community to all who wish to join in our worship and full membership regardless of race, age, gender, culture, sexual orientation, or economic status. In addition we believe that through our diversity, all can grow and practice a unity of faith that transcends our differences. We commit to modeling a community of faith and spirit that works toward openness and understanding, by offering justice, healing and wholeness of life for all people."

This is one powerful statement and it speaks volumes about who we are and who we aspire to become as a united faith community. In its broadest sense, this statement supports the promises that we reaffirm through our Baptismal Covenant; promises that remind us that as Christians we're called to

- Proclaim by word and example the Good news of God in Christ.
- Seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.
- Strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

This statement of inclusion was one of the first things that impressed me about the Christ Church community because it speaks of a radical inclusivity that invites everyone to be fully present just as they are. For me, Jesus' ministry of radical inclusivity is part of my own Christian belief system and I'm grateful to be serving within a faith community that feels the very same way. However, be that as it may.....I have to wonder.....if someone walked through our door right now who looked, dressed, and acted like say....John the Baptizer.....would I personally be able to honor the promises that I've made in my own

Baptismal Covenant? Would we, as a community of faith, be able to meet that person right where they were and allow them to feel comfortable in their own skin? And frankly, would we be comfortable in our own skin with someone as radical as John...someone who proclaimed the good news of Jesus' coming and someone who called us to preparation and repentance? I don't know about the rest of you, but I do have some serious doubts about my own behavior if a person like John the Baptizer were to walk through the door at this very minute!

In today's opening gospel passage from Mark, it is not Jesus who bursts onto the scene, but instead it is John the Baptizer; a prophet who moved to the beat of his own drum and an itinerant preacher who proclaimed that God was about to do a new thing in the coming of the Messiah. Through his own prophecy that a Messiah was coming and by his call for people to prepare and repent, John himself was the fulfilled embodiment of Isaiah's and Malachi's prophecies that a new prophetic voice would cry out in the wilderness, announcing that a Messiah was coming to bring hope and salvation to all of God's people for all of God's time.

It has been suggested by some that it was no coincidence that John began his prophetic ministry in the desert wilderness of Israel. For not only did John's wilderness ministry fulfill a previous prophecy by Isaiah and Malachi, but John's ministry also attracted curious throngs of people who chose to go into the wilderness with him. Throngs of people that went out of their way - going into the wilderness - to hear what this uniquely peculiar character John had to say about the coming of the Messiah. This John - who preached repentance and the forgiveness of human sins - drew people into the very place where many of us would rather not go; into the wilderness of our own lives; a place that is dark, murky, and uncertain. A place where we'd rather not be and often a place where we sometimes find ourselves lost and wandering in circles.

I believe it must have been the combination of John's unusual external appearance, his ability to speak with fire and charisma, and his messages of hope and repentance that enticed so many people to make a trip into the wilderness and hear what John had to say. Through his exhortations of personal preparation and repentance, John not only drew his audience in, but he called them to task as well. He called them to remember that in their preparation for the coming of the Messiah....that this Messiah was coming into the world not only for the "chosen" people of Israel....but for all of God's people all around the world. John's prophecy of Jesus' impending arrival reminds us not to arrogantly assume that the Messiah came only for a select group of godly people....but that God came to be among all of God's people....and God chose to meet each one of us as original, unique, and peculiar as each of us may be as well.

Through his charismatic exhortations for us to prepare and repent, John the Baptizer still calls to those of us who dare go into the wilderness with him by leaving the past and looking forward to a new day with new opportunities. On this new day and in preparation for the coming of our Messiah, John still calls us to be honest with ourselves and to be honest with others, to become humble instead of arrogant, and with a "new mind" to begin a new day with a kind of spiritual revolution that embraces integrity,

humility, honesty, truth, and the spirit of Christ's forgiveness. On this, the second Sunday of Advent as we continue to wait in anticipation for the coming of Christ, it is John the Baptizer....that curiously peculiar itinerant preacher who asks to practice what we preach; to welcome the stranger and show hospitality to our guests. To meet people where they are, by allowing them to feel comfortable in their own skin as we strive to remain comfortable in ours. Comfort, O comfort my people says your God, for the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all God's people shall see it together.

In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen.