

SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT
St. Mark 1:1-8
St. John the Baptist: Homiletics Prof

One day in Bible class a pastor told his members, “There is a sermon in every blade of grass.” He meant that every verse of the Bible is packed with meaning. Later that day he was out mowing the lawn in front of the parsonage when a member drove by. The member good-naturedly shouted out the window, “That’s right, Pastor, keep those blades of grass nice and short.”

Lots of people have lots of ideas about preaching. A while back someone in our Inquirers Class was talking to me and some of our members after God’s service. She kindly commented, “Pastor, I really like your sermons. I wish they were longer, though.” The members got a nervous look, smiled, and said, “Oh no, Pastor, your sermons are just right.”

Lots of people have lots of ideas about preaching, but, as much as we’d like to think someone can describe good preaching, the fact remains that good preaching is not described; it is heard. Some pastors have a hard time getting their nose out of their manuscripts. Some would be better off putting their nose in their manuscript a little more. Some have talking hands. Some have hands of cement at their side. There are all kinds of preachers, but the truly good preacher is the one that, in spite of being a “kind of preacher,” is only truly appreciated when his message is heard. In the Holy Gospel today, our preacher’s physical appearance left much to be desired. His manners weren’t exactly black tie material. His sermons weren’t the most eloquent or innovative. We hear nothing about his gestures or whether or not he had his nose in his manuscript. Yet we know he was a fantastic preacher, because we have his message, centered in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Homiletics is the study of preaching, and today we have the privilege of meeting St. John the Baptist: Homiletics Prof.

I thought about entitling my message from God’s Word today: St. John the Baptist: A Baptist Preacher Worth Listening To, but a certain someone thought some might not get the joke and get offended, and I got nervous some might actually think St. John the Baptist was really a Baptist, while we all know he was a Lutheran pastor. After all, he didn’t know how to dress and the confession of sins came before the sermon in his services out by the Jordan. Then I thought of the theme: Locusts and Honey: Hard to Swallow but Sweet to Taste. After all, he clearly preached the law but the gospel predominated in his message. St. Mark emphasizes this as the first verse of his Gospel says: “*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*” And doesn’t that sum John’s ministry up; he preached the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He gave us the words we sing before Jesus comes to us in the flesh in the Sacrament still today: “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*” But after trying hard to be witty or cute, I realized I had something to learn from our homiletics prof. Good preaching is less about the preacher and more about the preachment. If you want to improve your preaching, don’t look at yourself; look deeper into the text, for that is where you find Christ, the Son of God, and the heart and soul of the good news.

Think of St. John out there by the muddy Jordan preaching in camel’s hair and a leather belt. He lived in the wilderness, so I doubt he had any Dapper Dan in his hair. Perhaps he kept dinner there; I’d like to think there were a few locusts resting in his quaff. There he was, out by the river, preaching the same sermon day after day. “*Repent!*”—the same thing good preachers demand still today. Repent! That’s not the good news, but the good news is only truly good to those who’ve taken the bad news of their sin to heart. “*Repent,*” John demanded, “*and be*

baptized for the forgiveness of your sins.” What offers the forgiveness of sins? Baptism does; Baptism saves. The Greek formula clearly indicates the purpose of Baptism is forgiveness. “*Repent, and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins,*” John pled on God’s behalf. Why? Because that is when you meet Christ, whose sandals John was unworthy to untie.

And that is part of what is so amazing about St. John the Baptist: the humility in his message. Here he has the whole country of Judea coming out to him. Who knows how many Baptisms he performed. The statistical report for his ministry was off the charts. Word is the Synod even called him to put his picture on the Northwestern Lutheran, but changed their mind when they noticed he hadn’t bathed in a while. John had every reason to sit back and delight in the work of his hands, but he didn’t. He knew his hands were Christ’s hands and his mouth Christ’s mouth, as Christ was the one who called him to serve and Christ was the One to whom he pointed. His repentant hearers were baptized into Christ, who was coming to pay for what they had already been given: forgiveness. It was Christ, and not John, who gave the muddy waters of the Jordan, dirty with the sins of those baptized, its power to save, sending the Holy Spirit to work through John’s message and his administration of Baptism.

“*All the country of Judea and Jerusalem were going out to him.*” And John had the same message for all of them: *repent, be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, and look to Christ.* There is no mention of a joke about blades of grass or a witty theme, of any attempt to cater to any particular generation or demographic. No, John knew his talking points and stuck to them. He didn’t have to make the good news good or interesting. It was the best and most interesting news in the world already, at least in ears that had been crushed by the law and thirsted for the waters of eternal life. You’d think he’d get tired of preaching it, but good news never gets old. Rich and poor, young and old, Pharisee and sinner, hypocrite and sincere believer each got the same message, because each needed the same thing, no matter how holy they looked on the outside or how hopeless others thought they were: *repent, be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, and look to Christ.* For sinners without Christ are dying souls without medicine, drowning men without life preservers, no matter how nice and pious they may look to the world as they die and drown.

The Church is called to preach good news, not to make news good or to find new news to share. The Church is called to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. How is the Church to preach it? St. John the Baptist, our homiletics prof, teaches us that today: the Church is to preach the good news faithfully. Where is that message found? In every blade of grass—in every verse on every page of Scripture. Should a sermon be long or short? Should a pastor gesture or not, have his nose in his manuscript more often or less? Those are good questions for individual preachers to wrestle with, but none of these things will make one of them a good preacher. They might become better speakers, but good preachers are not described; they are heard, or rather, the good news is heard through good preachers. Let us pray for good preachers and, just as importantly, for good hearers. Let us hear our homiletics prof and learn from him the most important thing of all about preaching: the good new of Jesus Christ. Make that your standard for judging preachers, for the message is still relevant and vital, and, while it may be old, it is always fresh and contemporary, not because of how it is presented, but because of what it says: *repent, be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, and look to Christ.*