

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, Year B
Mark 1:1-8, December 4, 2006
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Which Jesus are you looking for?

One of the cool things about reading the Bible is the fact that it not only opens a window into the heart and mind of God, but also that it opens a window into the heart and mind of the author of whichever book you happen to be reading. And so, when we read the Bible, we not only see what's written on the page, but we can also look behind the words and get a glimpse what's going on in that author's world.

This is especially easy to do with most of St. Paul's writings. With the possible exception of his letter to the Romans, almost every one of Paul's letters were written *in response* to something that was going on in the community to which he was writing.

A perfect example, because everyone knows it, is 1st Corinthians 13, the famous "love passage." Paul didn't write these words because, one day he was musing about love and decided to memorialize his thoughts on paper. Rather, he was writing to the Corinthians about love, because word must have come to Paul that some of them were teaching things about love that Paul knew were wrong. [And if you've watched any of the police or courtroom dramas on television, then you know how people can get a pretty messed up idea about love. I mean, for example, here's a husband, beating his wife or children, and telling them that he's doing it because he loves them: "I love you, baby." *Bam, bam, bam!*] Admittedly, we don't know precisely what was going on, or being taught, in Corinth, but if Paul had to take the time, and expend the energy, to teach them about what real love was like, we can be pretty certain that something was seriously amiss.

So, here we are. We've looked at 1st Corinthians 13, and it's given us a glimpse of what has been going on in the church at Corinth. And, as I noted just a moment ago, it has also gives us a glimpse into the heart and mind of God. For, if 1st Corinthians 13 describes what true love is really like, and if "God is love", as the first letter of John tells us (1st John 4:8), then this passage also tells us what God is like. Pretty cool, huh?

Now, having said all this, we're ready to talk about today's Gospel reading, in which Mark is introducing us to John the Baptist. Interestingly, all four Gospels introduce John the Baptist in a similar fashion, with John saying something like, "I'm John, and I'm baptizing people with water as a sign of their repentance. But here's Jesus, and he's even more important than me. I'm not even good enough to untie the straps of his sandals." All four Gospels say approximately the same thing. Now, keep this in mind: if all four gospels happen to tell the very same story, then we know that the point of that story is very, very important.

Having said that, I'll remind you that the four Gospels are not identical. Each was written for a different audience, so the author of each Gospel had to make decisions about to include, and what to leave out. But the overall aim of each Gospel was the same, and John's Gospel described it best when he wrote: I have written these things "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ,

the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). So the purpose of the four Gospels is to convince us that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah.

So, let’s take what we’ve just learned – first, that the purpose of the Gospels is to affirm that Jesus is the Messiah and, second, that all four Gospels contain a story that elevates Jesus over John the Baptist – let’s take what we’ve learned, connect the dots, and see what sort of picture takes shape.

What becomes clear is that, even as late as the second-half of the first century, there were two different groups whose beliefs were having some impact within the church. One group, inside the Church, were the Christians who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. But outside the Church, there were some Jews who believed that John the Baptist was the Messiah. Clearly, the Jews were being heard, and their arguments were persuasive enough to cause some of the Christians to question their faith in Jesus. And the authors of the Gospels had to put a stop to that, and set things absolutely straight: Jesus, and not John the Baptist, is the Messiah. And this was such an important distinction to make, because they knew that the God about whom John the Baptist and his followers preached and taught, was very different from the God that Jesus revealed to us. Let me give you an example of how different they were.

One day, when a group of Pharisees and Sadducees came to John the Baptist, seeking to be baptized by him, he greeted them with these words:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 3:7-8, 10).

Now, compare this to Jesus’ reaction, when a woman, who was caught in the act of adultery, is brought before him. After an initial exchange between Jesus and the men who brought her to him, and after Jesus had managed to shame those men into dropping their accusations and leaving, he says to the woman:

“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more” (John 8:10-11).

Could those two men be any more different? And what these two examples show us, is that Jesus and John the Baptist operated from two very different paradigms.

Now, in case you’re wondering, a paradigm is a way of looking at the world. It’s the way in which we organize what we think is true into meaningful patterns. Every human being embraces a particular paradigm; it’s like the lenses through which we observe the world, and they influence how we interpret what we observe. Certainly, our personal experiences help to shape our paradigms, but they are also shaped by the things we’ve been taught by the people we trust. But

our paradigms are not fixed; they are always changing and shifting. I like the example of a jigsaw puzzle: the pieces all seem to fit together, but one day you learn something new, and suddenly a particular piece of the puzzle doesn't seem to fit so well, and you discover that you can replace it with this new piece. And that one new piece changes the whole picture, even if just a little bit.

When John the Baptist looked at the world through his paradigm, he saw a God who was quick to get angry, and quick to condemn, and quick to threaten to “cut down” and throw into “the fire” anyone who disobeyed him. But when Jesus looked at the world through his paradigm, he saw a God who was quick to understand, and quick to forgive, and quick to love.

Today's Gospel reading lets us know that, among other things, in the early church community there was an ongoing conflict between these two paradigms. And the future of the Christian community hinged on the outcome of that conflict.

Now, I've taken the time to talk about all this for two reasons. First, I'm convinced that the recent conflicts we can observe, not only within the Episcopal Church, but also within the greater Anglican Communion, are the result of different people embracing different paradigms. We can even see this in the conflicts between the Southern Baptists and the American Baptists, between the Missouri Synod Lutherans and the Evangelical Lutherans, between Protestants and Catholics, between liberals and conservatives. These conflicts all stem from different people having different paradigms.

Knowing this may not help end the conflicts any quicker, but it may help us better understand those who oppose us, and it may help us to be more patient while we work toward some resolution. But we also have to realize that, for some people, there will be no resolution. In fact, it might not surprise you to know that there is a small sect in Iraq called the Mandeans, who trace their history back to John the Baptist, and who *still* regard him as the Messiah.

The second reason I've taken the time to talk about all this, is because we're in the Season of Advent. We're not only looking forward to the celebration of Jesus' birthday but, in the bigger scheme of things, we're also looking ahead to the final return of Jesus, in great power and glory, to judge and rule the world. And what we need to think about is this: with which paradigm will we look for the Second Coming of Jesus? Will it be with the paradigm of people like John the Baptist? Or with the paradigm that Jesus handed down to us. That is, will we look for Jesus to come and condemn us, and cast us into an eternal lake of fire? Or will we look for Jesus to come and forgive us, and welcome us into his eternal kingdom? It makes a difference.

When it's all said and done, however, it's up to you to decide which paradigm you will accept, which “truth” you will embrace as eternal. But there is Good News in all this: Regardless of which paradigm you take, regardless of what you think of God, nothing will change the way God thinks of you. For God will still love you, and embrace you, and welcome you, and forgive you, and encourage you. This is not to say that our choice of paradigms doesn't matter. In fact, it matters a lot, because it will profoundly affect the way you look at the world, and at the people around you.

Which paradigm will you choose? The author of Mark's gospel made his choice. The authors of every book in the New Testament made their choice. In this season of Advent, this question is posed: Which paradigm do you choose?