

“Beware of Shouting Baptists”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

December 6, 2020 – Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

Beware of shouting baptists! This is my word of advice for you on this second Sunday of Advent.

In particular, I recommend that you beware of the baptist named John and another named Jesus that are the subjects of today’s lesson from the Gospel of Mark. I don’t mean beware of them as in stay away from them or expect them to bring harm; rather, beware of them as in be aware of them and their shouts: Pay attention! Listen up! For both of these baptists of old are prophets, sent by God to deliver us messages to which we should take heed this morning.

Consider the message of John. This camel-hair-coat-wearing, grasshopper-eating desert dweller sure looked the part of the prophet in the line of Elijah, the greatest prophet of Israel, who was a hairy miracle-worker that called down fire from the sky and ascended to the heavens in a whirlwind, riding a chariot of fire. From the moment of his miraculous departure, the people of Israel expected their great, fiery prophet Elijah would return to earth. The prophet Malachi wrote that Elijah would come again “before the great and dreadful day of the Lord” (Mal. 4:5). In the day of Jesus, the people longed for Elijah’s return and for the great day of God’s just reign on earth to begin, and many followed John the Baptist as they considered him to be Elijah, who had returned to earth from heaven to prepare the people for the coming day of God’s reign.

While he was not a returned Elijah, he was like him in calling for people to be prepared for the coming of God’s reign among them. His message was for the people to repent, to turn from lives of sin and

towards living in God's ways and to mark this turning with baptism, an act symbolizing cleansing and newness in purpose.

The baptist shouted in the desert for people to turn to God, but while this was long ago, his voice still lingers. John still calls for us to prepare for God's just realm to come and grow by turning toward God. Let us be aware of this prophet's message this morning!

And consider the other baptist in today's reading, Jesus Christ, who came not to dunk people under water, but to pour upon them a divine fire, the cleansing, empowering Breath of God. Jesus the baptist poured out God's breath as he cried out for people to love God and love their neighbor. He shouted out a message that those in life's valleys should be lifted up, and those on the mountains should be lowered. He proclaimed good news that God's day of justice was upon us and is growing among us. His message was that the light of God shined in our dark world, and this light was growing in brightness, displacing the darkness with hope, peace, joy, and love. Let us be aware of this message of good news to the world this morning!

We need to pay more attention to these messages of Jesus and John, these baptizing prophets of God, and pay less attention to some of the other voices that shout at us, calling for our attention. For there are many voices shouting, and not all of them *should* receive our attention. Some of these shouting voices are just noise that, if allowed, can drown out the sound of the good voices to which we should listen.

We live in an era when there are many such noisy voices. This is a post-truth world of alternative facts, where many hucksters loudly claim to speak prophetically, wacky conspiracy theories abound, expertise is devalued, and opinions seemingly matter more than facts. With social media, everyone has a megaphone, where they can shout out their truth, no matter how untrue it may be. And we gather ourselves in

information silos of our own choosing, echo chambers where we listen to other like-minded people and reject others as offering fake news, and so our worldview is profoundly shaped by the voices that we choose to listen to. So be careful, little eyes, what you see, and be careful, little ears, what you hear.

And this day, choose to listen to John and Jesus and their message to turn toward that which offers more hope, more peace, more joy, and more love. And let this be a filter for you when discerning what is of God and what is not: Does a message bring more light, hope, peace, joy, or love? This is likely God's voice. Does something take away light, hope, peace, joy, or love? This is likely not of God.

May you pay attention to God's messages this day, and may you turn more towards God's voice and find God's indwelling Spirit bringing you more light and more life. Amen.