

Sermon

Epiphany 1, Year B

Acts 19:1-7

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” Then he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They answered, “Into John’s baptism.” Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— altogether there were about twelve of them.

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Prayer:

In the name of the Father, and the son and the Holy Spirit. +

Please be seated.

Sermon:

Today' Gospel tells us that John the Baptist
ate locusts and wild honey,
and wore clothes woven of camel's hair.

He didn't have to live so rugged.
People had already been weaving fabric
from soft silk and linen for a thousand years.

Even poor people didn't wear camel fur clothes. ⁱ
Plus, John ate bugs. Hardly anybody did that 2000 years ago.

Some people thought John was nuts. Maybe.
But I don't think so.ⁱⁱ He chose his way of life. ⁱⁱⁱ

John's Dad was a Temple priest.
His Mom was a relative of Mary's, Jesus' mother.
John the Baptist came from a well situated family. ^{iv}

So, John choose to dress the way he dressed
and to live the way he lived. He was really dedicated.

But to what? Just one thing: *to show the people how to find Jesus.*

Hardly anybody, then or now, walks away from a comfortable life,
But it worked for John.
People understood that John really mattered. ^v

However strange John might seem to us,
Overfed and living easy in our air-conditioned homes,
We should give him credit for calling things
as he saw them. *And he saw a lot.*

John was quite a big deal back then,
And he would be today.
Oprah missed her chance by a couple of thousand years!

John had a unique way of being God's messenger.
He called people to God. John still does.
When he spoke, people listened. They still do.

When he called People to baptism in the cold River Jordan,
they came down and stood in line.

Today, we still seek the Lord's Baptism.
But we skip the icy cold water.

John was kind of odd.
We probably don't want him moving in next door.
We probably don't want him hanging around
when we drop our kids or grandkids off at school....

John got a lot of attention,
but that wasn't his goal.
He didn't really want to be the focus.
He was waiting for Jesus.

And, some Christians are still waiting.
Some eagerly await the 2nd Coming,
Hoping to be raptured into heaven.
But heaven is not some sort of uberDisneyworld.

Some Christians want to hide away, locked into prayer and devotion,

Far from our troubled world.

But, Jesus was up to his eyeballs in the real world.

He lectured in the Temple. He attended wedding feasts.

John was somewhere between those two extremes.

He was on a different path. He saw Jesus coming.

And... God has given us a different path, than he gave to John.

John said,

“I have baptized you with water;

but Jesus will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

The Holy Spirit will open our eyes,

if we care to have our eyes opened.

When we open our eyes we will see,

that the Lord is really and truly present,

and that because the Lord *is* with us, we are one people.

We will see that, because we are one people,

we are stronger and wiser than we could ever be alone.

We will see that because we are one people we can,

More easily work with the Spirit to build the Kingdom.

Right here. Killeen, Texas. Right now.

God has always worked that way.

Today we heard about Paul meeting 12 believers who,

who had been baptized in John's baptism of repentance?

Paul, in turn, baptized them in the name of Jesus.

He called them together, in Jesus name,
and Jesus still calls us to work together.

Ours is a God of new beginnings. He has always been!

Ours is a God of an eternal past *and* of an eternal future.

Ours is a God of a very old faith and very old ways,

But She is also a God of a renewed faith, and a very new way.

Something new sounds pretty good right now.

Who doesn't want to look over our shoulder,
at Covid 2020, and wave goodbye?

Who doesn't like the idea of the sun shining bright on a new day,
free of our recent drama and angst?

Who doesn't want a fresh start and a new thing?

Jesus said, "I have come, that you might have life
and have it more abundantly." ^{vi}

That is the Baptism into which we've been called.

Isn't it awesome to know that God has planned -- for each of us --
a new beginning, with new and great things,
and a wonderful healthy peaceful life?

Isn't it wonderful to know that we are called together --
as one people -- one Church family?

There is a new thing in play here at St. Christopher's.

There is a new thing in play here in Killeen,
and in the Great State of Texas,
and in the whole of these United States.

Politics may separate us. So what?

The Lord calls us together. We've got work to do!

Jesus said:

“This is the work of God,
that you believe in him whom he has sent.”^{vii}

They said to Jesus,

“What must we do to perform the works of God?”

Jesus said “I am the bread of life.”

Come to our table and share in Jesus' real presence.

Come with an open heart and open hands and an open mind.

Let the Holy Spirit pour into you a renewed courage,

a renewed faith, a renewed love and a renewed passion,

for the good work we are called to do here,

at St. Christopher's, in Killeen.

One Kingdom. One people. One church!

Amen.

ⁱ The word “textile” is derived from the Latin word 'texere', which means 'to weave'. The spinning and weaving of cloth began in Egypt, circa 3400 BCE. After approximately 2600 BCE silk was spun, while European populations tended to choose wool, cotton and linen. See, <https://www.tootal.nl/en/news/show/22/The-history-of-woven-textiles>

ⁱⁱ Luke's and Matthew's Gospels are our main source for information on John the Baptist. John is mentioned in the Josephus's history (See, his *Jewish Antiquities*, XVIII, v. 2.)

Zachary, the Baptist's father, was a priest; John's mother, Elizabeth, “was of the daughters of Aaron” and Mary's cousin or other close relative (Grk: *suggenis*). (See, Luke 1:5). Zachary and

Elizabeth were aged folk, and the birth of a child to them was something rather miraculous. See, Luke 1: 6-7, to wit, “they had no son, for that Elizabeth was barren”. See, also, 1: 8-17, “they were both advanced in years”, and they bore the social burden of childlessness, when, while performing a priestly function (i.e., offering incense in the Temple, “there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, ... “Fear not, Zachary, for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John: and thou shalt have joy and gladness, and many shall rejoice in his nativity. For he shall be great before the Lord; and shall drink no wine nor strong drink: and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb.”

The Gospels suggest that John was born about six months before Christ. St. Luke wrote that “the child grew, and was strengthened in spirit; and was in the deserts, until the day of his manifestation ...” (1: 80). “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar ... the word of the Lord was made unto John, the son of Zachary, in the desert. And he came into all the country about the Jordan, preaching” (Luke 3: 1-3), clothed not in the soft garments of a courtier (Matt. 8; Luke 7: 24), but in those “of camel’s hair, and a leather girdle about his loins”; and “his meat “—he looked as if he came neither eating nor drinking (Matt. 11: 18-12: 33)—”was locusts and wild honey” (Matt. 3: 4; Mark 1: 6); *some people scoffed at him, saying that he had a devil.* *Matt. 11:18.* See, <https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/john-the-baptist-saint>

iii We don’t choose where we start but (in broad strokes) we do choose where we end up.

iv Mary, was a retaliation to John’s Mother. We first Mary as an unmarried virgin, but God had other plans for her life! After Jesus was born, she apparently married Joseph, who, as a carpenter, was a self-employed skilled workman, with his own tools. They may have had other kids. Europeans today might have considered Joseph, Mary and the children members of the *Petite Bourgeoisie*.

v Neither the Scriptures nor apocryphal writings nor ancient commentaries agreed on the issue of whether Mary remained a perpetual virgin as is asserted by the Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox churches, as did Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, John Wesley, and Anabaptist leader Balthasar Hubmaier.

For many the NT references to Jesus’ “brothers” (Grk: adelphoi) were to persons that were either Jesus’ cousins, or his close friends or perhaps, as argued by the Eastern Orthodox, Joseph’s children by an unrecorded first wife. Neither the Catholics, the Anglicans, Lutherans, nor Methodists require clarification of these persons’ status, save and except that they were not Mary’s biological children. Conversely, of course, the Jesus Seminar asserts that the doctrine of perpetual virginity is false.

As for me, I wonder what all the fuss is about. It appears that we are contending with ancient notions that virginity is a more “pure” status than non-virginity. One must wonder if the fuss stems from cultural concerns regarding inheritance and family lineage. Certainly a God who would place His or Her son in the womb of a human woman, is not likely to be much offended with the potential that other children might be born of the womb, through the more usual and common way that God himself designed?

^{vi} John 10: 10.

^{vii} John 6:29 (NIV) Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."