



“ABIDING”

SCRIPTURE: MARK 1:1-8

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, December 10, 2023, Advent #2

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

Mark 1:1-8

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

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."

The Word of the LORD

Thanks be to God.

As Western culture became more and more industrialized, more and more colonized by capitalism, more and more assimilated into the normalization of consumption and individualism, and more and more forced into mentalities of productivity, our forebears lost some very important practices that helped to shape people and communities—we lost many of the rites of passage of our earliest ancestors.

Those rites of passage were important ways human beings came of age and understood their connection and purpose in the world. We can't romanticize all of them—some were brutal and seem cruel to our contemporary mentalities. The loss of others has left us adrift

and in misalignment with our created nature and with nature itself. Capitalism has thrived in a more extractive model of human purpose, in a view of human beings as dominant over creation, rather than as animals, a part of the natural world, and called into balance with the creatures with whom we share this world. We are on the brink of disaster on our planet because we are culturally so estranged from the land, from our bodies and from the land.

We are living in a sixth mass extinction, one occurring at an alarmingly fast rate because of human activity, accelerating at a terrifying rate since industrialization. Dr. Katie Collins from the Natural History Museum:

“The current rate of extinction is between 100 and 1,000 times higher than the pre-human background rate of extinction, which is jaw-dropping. We are definitely going through a sixth mass extinction.”

Never before has a single species been responsible for such destruction on Earth.”¹

The loss of life, of vitality, of bio-diversity, and of our humanity is an existential and ecological dark age. By that I mean our collective shadow is killing us because we are refusing to acknowledge what shadows can do when we don't truly know them, truly go in and see what they have to teach us.

Advent is shadow work. Advent is leaning into the depths of darkness, to the gifts of darkness.

Last week we started our acclimation to the darkness. Now we are a week in, with several more weeks to go. What happens when we can't rush through the darkness? What happens with God's invitation is to abide in the dark?

What gifts are here for us when we can't see things clearly? When we have to let go of some of the things that have oriented us in the past? Things feel different in the dark, they sound different in the dark.

This year we are learning some new songs, we are practicing a new relationship with light and dark, practicing with different ways to use the Advent candles to learn new things about ourselves and about God.

These practices align with the call and purpose of Advent—learning to work in the dark—and to not try and rush through the dark, but trust that God wants us here and has something

¹ <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/what-is-mass-extinction-and-are-we-facing-a-sixth-one.html>

for us to learn every time we find ourselves cycling back through the darkness, the shadows. We desperately need to learn here in the shadows together for something to change. Advent is when this message of a changing world takes on new urgency—and we are called to dream out loud, to stay awake in the darkest places, and we are called to change our ways so we will be ready for the Incarnate God's arrival in our midst.

Advent is the prophets; John the Baptist, Mary. The up enders, the provocateurs, the early adopters of a changed world, those who were the first to shed old ways.

Advent is shadow work; Advent is coming of age in the life of faith; Advent is getting aligned with our divine purpose so we are ready for a new proximity with God. This shadow work is both personal and collective. We live in cultural shadows that need our attention.

We can't get right with God only in isolation. Its why John emerged from the wilderness that taught him who he was to call the people to turn around so they would be ready for Jesus.

(slowly scroll through images of John the Baptist)

John the Baptist is not competitive with Jesus. He is collaborative. He is a co-conspirator, a comrade, a brother in the righteous cause.

John's baptism is different than other purification rituals of the time. It was a one-time thing—not a cyclical or repeated thing. It was a rite of passage, a life change, a new way of being in the world.

John's lineage was priestly. His father Zechariah, was a temple priest. His mother, Elizabeth, and Jesus's mother were cousins. He was Jesus's kin.

He ate locusts, honey, and wore camel's hair—this was the food and clothing of those who lived close to the earth, in poverty by Roman standards, but in sync with the earth. People like John also probably didn't not have access to the finer things. We can assume John did have access, but the misalignment with his divine purpose was too much for him, so he went into the wilderness to find himself and to find himself at home in the world, to find his divine rite of passage.

His call was to repent—which literally means to turn around, to change the way you are going, to bring a new intention and direction to your existence.

In terms of shadow work, John the Baptist is an archetype—the Wild Man.

(Be done with the images of John the Baptist by this point)

Carl Jung’s definition of the archetypes is: “Archetypes are factors and motifs that arrange the psychic elements into certain images characterized as archetypal in such a way that they are recognized only from the effects they produce.” Which means we don’t really have ways to describe them except through their impact on us.

Jung believed we needed to go deeper than just our personality, than our conscious self-understanding or persona. Personas are the masks we wear, the roles we play, the identities we take on for survival and to belong. In Jungian terms, the shadow is the persona’s “dark twin.”

Shadows are repressed aspects of our psyche, the things we don’t want to acknowledge, our hidden fears and anxieties. For Jung, the shadows are the way to healing, the way to becoming whole and in right relationship with the world and what he called “Self”, which is a word signaling transcendence, Divinity.

When we don’t befriend our shadows, they express themselves as unconscious psychological tendencies that we project onto others, and they can be potent tools of delusion, destruction, and harm.

The goal is to integrate, bring the conscious and unconscious together. Integrate all the parts—even the parts that we don’t like, that we think are bad.

Enter John the Baptist, the Wild Man archetype. The Wild Man was an ancient archetypal figure whose purpose was to teach boys how to become men. This was not about conquest, but about interdependence and connection. This was not about domination, but about humility and knowing one’s place in the world, and one’s power to harm and to heal.

Oscar Perez, columnist for the Good Men Project and Founder of Tending the Fires, “an organization dedicated to helping people create thriving, healthy relationships so they can make a positive impact on their communities and the world” wrote:

The Wild Man is something, or I should say someone that exists in the liminal regions, the in-between spaces of our psyches and of our societies. It is a central figure of the dawn of human history, and one that has been subsequently pushed aside and demonized as societies became increasingly more agricultural [and I would add industrial]. ...the Wild Man is the intimate link between humanity and the living wilderness. It is the gatekeeper of our animal nature. In a culture that has attempted

en masse to create a myth of its own exceptionalism and superiority above nature, the Wild Man is at once a reminder that we are all part of something greater that moves through us, that we cannot control, and that we are just as animal as the creatures we claim intellectual and spiritual superiority over.²

Actually about humility and interdependence, not a dominator.

Your inner wild man—it's not something you can purchase as a new outfit or befriend on a weekend retreat. The Wild Man in your shadows impacts you, it is driving you in ways you are not aware of, it speaks to you in your dreams, and in the ways you are and are not moving in sync with your created nature, your wildness, your natural ways of being.

In our contemporary world, rites of passage for most young men involve things like drinking, sexual conquest, violence, and pushing down emotions other than anger. The Wild Man is not a frat boy. The Wild Man is not animal house. The Wild Man is the self-actualized masculine part of us—who knows its place in the scheme of things, who does not dominate, but is humble and brave.

In our collective shadow work, we could say that masculinity in American culture, capitalist culture is stuck in adolescence, it has not found its wildness—western civilization would sooner behead John the Baptist than befriend him and be immersed in the waters of repentance. This humility is something our collective shadow has violently resisted.

John the Baptist initiated Jesus into his place in the world—a place of truth teller, a place of compassion and justice and peace, the embodiment of right relationship, the disruptor of the status quo that created idols out of wealth, oppression, and consumption. John the Baptist comes out of the wilderness, out of the shadows to support our collective coming of age as God's people.

How ironic that Christianity so early on became the destroyer of indigenous cultures that understood the human place in the created world. What a bitter and destructive and grievous irony that Jesus' name became the one uttered to justify genocide and colonization.

² <https://goodmenproject.com/ethics-values/masculinity-and-the-wild-man-myth-bbab/> Quote from Oscar Perez: OSCAR C. PEREZ PhD is a teacher, spiritual counselor, motivational speaker, writer and martial artist. He weaves together nearly three decades of experience in cross-cultural healing traditions, martial arts, Jungian Psychology, storytelling, and wilderness immersion into creating transformation in the lives of his clients and students. He is the founder of Tending the Fires, and organization dedicated to helping people create thriving, healthy relationships so they can make a positive impact on their communities and the world. He is a columnist for The Good Men Project and a returning teacher at the Minnesota Men's Conference.

As Christianity became more and more colonized, the Wild Man took to the shadows, and we became ashamed of this part of ourselves. We scoffed at indigenous cultures as superstitious and ignorant. We suffocated their teaching about food and medicine and taking care of the earth. And we built our institutions on the graveyards of the buffalo, and the biodiversity of God's creation.

John the Baptist was calling humanity back to our created nature, our divine purpose—what a tragedy that he has been used to prop up systems of shame, blame, and judgment on those Christians that have been labeled as “uncivilized.”

John the Baptist was not a colonized believer, he was not an apologist for institutional Christianity, he did not lose his life to King Herod because he propped up the powers that be.

He was not calling people to capitalist assimilation. He was not calling people to a patriarchal Christian piety. He was not calling people to consumptive productivity.

He was calling people back to God, back to right relationship, back to a life lived in balance.

John the Baptist was humble, he was bold; he is our Wild Man shadow that sees how we are harming each other and ourselves with the way we live.

In 2023, our Advent shadow work must speak into the urgent changes that we need to make to live on our planet right now.

Our shadow work must include attention to our consumption, our extraction of natural resources without replacing them at all, it must include a humility around who is truly wise about what the earth needs from human beings.

Indigenous communities all over the world are calling the world to listen to them, to give them leadership in this climate crisis.

They are asking for the colonized world to come to terms with our shadows, and with the violent self-destruction these unmet shadows enact in our collective lives. Our collective shadow work around masculinity, around creativity and productivity can help us come to peace with the fact that the normative culture does not have the answers to our most urgent challenges as a human race.

If we do our collective shadow work, we can realize that it's time for us to listen more, it's time for us to decenter the norms that have been leading the way for generations, to listen to the voices of those who know better and know how to do better.

There are so many gifts here in the dark, Grace Covenant. There is life and hope and promise here. There is wildness and there is wisdom. There is prophecy and there is truth.

Our shadows are not our enemies, but we will continue to work at cross purposes if we deny them. Hear the voice crying out in the wilderness: prepare the way for God's inbreaking of God's creation healed!

Let's take a collective deep breath together—and remember that the call is to come home to ourselves, to the way that we are made.

Breathe in the promise of not rushing to the brash light of what we already know too soon. Breathe in the promise of the divine dark.

Let the words of one of our modern-day John the Baptists wash over you, the poet and KY farmer, and environmental prophet, Wendell Berry:

Wendell Berry, The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Thanks be to God.