

WGUMC December 7, 2014
"Christ Comes in Community"

Mark 1:1-8

Living on Victoria Court in Sioux City, Iowa, I always knew what Christmas looked like: snow on the ground, icicles hanging from the eaves, and 4'X8' pieces of plywood painted with holiday greetings looking like giant postcards propped up on every front lawn on the street. Because everyone put their name on their sign, even if you were a stranger to the neighborhood, you felt like a friend. On ours, my Mom painted a big Santa, waving his hand, saying "Ho, ho, ho. Merry Christmas from the Irelands."

It was a wonderful life, back when you knew your neighbors and Christmas just wasn't Christmas without them. As you can imagine, my nostalgia meter goes off the scale whenever I drive around Glen Eyrie during the month of December. And I'm not alone. A lot of people move here precisely because they can't get back there, back to that idyllic

time when a sense of belonging to a community wasn't such a hard thing to come by.

To make it even harder, we happen to live in the epicenter of West Coast individualism. Here in San Jose, we work in cubicles. We stare at cell phones and computer screens all day. We are solo drivers on the freeway. We go to the gym with our earbuds in. We eat out alone. It's hard to find community when we don't have time to talk to anyone.

Here's the saddest part of the story: when we do almost everything else alone, we start to think that we can do Jesus on our own. "I don't need to go to church. I can listen to Christian radio and get all the God I need." "I don't need to study the Bible with other people. I know how to read."

We must be modern-day John the Baptists, who went out there all by himself, wearing camel's hair and eating locusts. Well, no wonder he was a lone voice crying out in the wilderness! But even without eating bugs or smelling like a

camel, we like to think of our own spiritual life as a solo journey like his. After all, we are going where no one else has ever gone or can go. No one else can live our life. No one else can face our demons or dream our dreams. We have such a unique set of life circumstances that we have a lone voice, and we figure we have to cut our own track through the wilderness. And our culture encourages us, "Go out there and stay out there all by yourself."

But John the Baptist wasn't alone for long. People heard his voice proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and they came from the whole Judean countryside and from Jerusalem as well to be baptized by John in the Jordan. Now the Gospel of Mark doesn't record what John said. So we have to read the Gospels of Matthew and Luke to get a sense of what it was that made the people want to listen and then get wet.

I'm afraid that today we wouldn't want to listen, and we would regard him as all wet, for the first words out of his mouth were "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" [Lk 3:7; Mt 3:7] John wasn't called a Baptist for nothing. He sure knew how to deliver the hellfire and brimstone. He said, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance... Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." [Lk 3:8a, 9; Mt 3:8.10]

This is about the time that many of us would write our "Dear John" letter and leave him to fend for himself in the wilderness. But some of us would be hooked on his promise of forgiveness and stay a little longer. The crowds who stayed with John in the Gospel of Luke were anxious, and so they asked him, "What then shall we do?" [Lk 3:10] In reply, he didn't tell them, "You have to do it alone." He didn't tell them,

"Go off by yourselves, sit in a cave, read the Bible, fast and pray."

That's because John wasn't out in the wilderness to escape from the world. John's idea of preparing the way was to bring God into the world. So he told them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." To the tax collectors, he said, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." To the soldiers, he said, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." [Lk 3:12-14]

But this is not the message we were expecting from the one who was preparing the Way of the Lord. What does any of this have to do with the Way of Salvation?

To me, what John is saying is what all the prophets and Jesus are saying: that salvation is not something we seek on our own or only for ourselves. Repenting of sins means repairing relationships. Returning to God means restoring God's

people. While our God is personal, there is no salvation that isn't also communal.

With that in mind, I don't really mind all the mail that comes at this time of year from dozens of organizations asking me for money. In fact, I'm glad that these groups make me more aware of the immense need for God in our community. Because the more aware I am of the desperate need for God in this city and the more willing I am to respond to that need, the more ready I am for God to come to me.

"What then shall we do?" The mayor-elect, Sam Liccardo, was out at the Jungle on Thursday morning. The Jungle is—or was—the largest homeless encampment right in the middle of one of the nation's wealthiest cities. The city was closing it down and Sam was there, helping one of the homeless men push a shopping cart full of his personal belongings up a muddy bank in the drizzling rain. Now, I know that Sam is a politician and he has a warm house to sleep in, but you have to give him

credit for having the courage to come face to face with a person with a problem that he had no way to make disappear. The city can close the Jungle, but it can't make the homeless disappear.

This week reminded me of when I was a pastor in Santa Cruz. There was a smaller encampment along the San Lorenzo River close to downtown, and it raised the same issues regarding water contamination. But the residents there had constructed a functioning community. They called it Camp Paradise. They made paths from one campsite to another, and put up little street signs. They had rules about drugs and violence and litter and a leadership council that tried to enforce them.

One warm sunny day, I went down there and got a tour. The camp was in pretty good order. It wasn't exactly my neighborhood back in the 60's in Sioux City, but the feeling was respectful and peaceful. The neighbors in houses nearby

complained about the problem, but no one really had a solution. Then the winter rains came, and the police closed down the camp.

What then shall we do? Pastor Stan Abraham of Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church invited twelve members of Camp Paradise to put up their tents on the church's five acres that happened to be zoned for a campground. Calling themselves the Santa Cruz Service Corps, these homeless men and women began cutting lawns, clearing out poison oak, removing dead trees and planting new ones. [Metro Santa Cruz, May 1-8, 2002] Though every one of the twelve had signed statements from the Homeless Services Center that they had been denied shelter and weren't likely to get it, the county responded to the situation by red-tagging the property and threatening the church with fines. And so the campers had to move on.

Not every church can turn its campus into a campsite and that is not a permanent solution anyway. But Pastor Abraham

did what he did because he understood that somehow his own salvation depends on his willingness to live for others, to save others.

What then shall we do? I was pondering this question as I picked up my tree from Kate Sabatini yesterday. She's the one who coordinates ordering the outdoor trees for our neighborhood. She creates community once a year on her driveway as neighbors who don't know each other come to pick up their trees.

Now, if we can organize a neighborhood to decorate for Christmas, why can't we organize it to practice Christmas the rest of the year? If we can buy trees, why can't we feed the hungry? Why can't we come together to find solutions to the housing crisis in this city? All I know is that if we don't come together to save others, we will not be prepared for God to come and save us.

John the Baptist came to help us prepare the way for Jesus and that's just another way to say that Christmas begins with us. You may recognize these words from the end of the candlelight service on Christmas Eve:

Whenever we offer food to the hungry or clothe the naked or shelter the homeless, it is Christmas.

Whenever we lend a hand, wipe a tear, say a prayer for another, it is Christmas.

Whenever we welcome a stranger, forgive an enemy, or reconcile with a brother or sister, it is Christmas.

Whenever God's love takes flesh in our lives and we bury ourselves in the being of God, it is Christmas.

Prepare the way of the Lord.