

1st Sunday after the Epiphany

January 10, 2021

Collect: FATHER IN HEAVEN, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God in glory everlasting. Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-

Mark 1:4-11

Sermon: Today's Gospel teaches us about John the Baptist, a special rabbi that God had prepared to usher Jesus and his ministry into the world. There are some amazing facts about John. First, he is a cousin to Jesus. God's angel messenger, Gabriel, announced John's birth to his priest father, Zecharia, just as he announced the birth of Jesus to Mary. Also, John had disciples, some of whom joined Jesus and his ministry. John baptized Jesus and watched him be filled with the Holy Ghost. Later John's life would end early by having his head cut off.

The prophet Isaiah (40:3) had foretold of John the Baptist during the Babylonian Exile. He prophesied; There would be a voice crying in the wilderness: Prepare a road for the Lord, make a straight highway across the desert for Yahweh, our God. (40:5) Then the Glory of Yahweh shall be revealed and all mankind shall see it.

The Gospel of Mark (1:1-4) refers to the prophet Isaiah and his writing: "Look, I am sending my messenger to you, he will prepare your way. A voice cries in the wilderness: Prepare a way for the Lord, make his way straight."

The voice described here is John the Baptist.

John's father the priest Zechariah was officiating at the temple and was in its' holiest part when God's messenger, Gabriel appeared to him and told him that his wife would bear a son and name him John. John would be great in the eyes of the Lord, and he would be filled with the Holy Spirit. He would also bring people to the Lord their God.

John was born and raised as a Nazarite, a Jewish religious order that took an oath to abstain from drinking alcohol, cutting their hair and touching the dead. His life centered around learning the Torah, and the religious and ethnic traditions of family and Jewish society. Some scholars think he studied with the Essenes, an ancient Jewish community committed to prayer, celibacy, study and work.

Some scholars think that Jesus also studied with this group. That would account for John knowing who Jesus was and preaching that there was to come one more powerful after him. This one was so powerful that, he, John wasn't worthy to unlatch or take off his sandals.

John the Baptist lived in the Judean countryside. He was a fiery preacher and with his uncut hair and scraggly beard he must have appeared as a wild man.

Many at St. Matthew's have a vivid image of what John must have looked like. Once just as I had just finished a sermon that discussed John the Baptist, a homeless man fitting the description walked into our sanctuary. He stayed around for a year or so and of course, among ourselves we always thought of him as a dead ringer for John the Baptist.

The scripture says that John wore clothes made of animal skins and that he ate locust and wild honey. He preached about repentance and living a life that would be acceptable to God. Many people were coming out to the Jordan River to be baptized by him. John declared that he baptized with water, but the one coming after him would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

One day Jesus came to the River Jordan wanting to be baptized by John. John argued with him. "You want me to baptize you, No, no you should be baptizing me." John knew Jesus and who he really was. Remember, they were cousins, and must have spent time together as they grew up. They also

must have studied together. Jesus too was a Nazarene and scholars think he studied with the Essenes.

John baptized Jesus and as Jesus came up from under the water, the sky, the heaven opened and the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove and landed on Jesus. Then the voice of God spoke, "This is my Son in whom I am well pleased."

For John this was proof that Jesus was the Messiah, the Anointed One that the prophets had preached about. He would later refer to Jesus as the Lamb of God that took away the sins of the world.

Now there is something else interesting, John may have seen Jesus as the Lamb taking away the sins of the people because of a yearly event at the temple.

On the day of Atonement, a Jewish day of prayer for the forgiveness of sins, a goat was chosen and brought to the high priest at the temple. The priest laid his hands on the head of the goat, transferring the sins of all the families and people into this goat. This goat was then led away and released into the desert, removing the sins of the people. He was called the scapegoat.

Perhaps John knew Jesus to be a gentle soul, docile as a lamb and not rambunctious as a goat.

Rev. Lionel Starkes