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Advent 2B, December 10, 2023
Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8
Uncompromising Comfort

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This Second Sunday of Advent is our annual chance to reflect on this handsome fellow here, John the Baptist (pointing to our banner). In one of my recent Midweek Sermons on Matthew, I noted that Jesus praised the man in an extraordinary way. Our Lord's praise goes this way:

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; (Matthew 11:11, RSV)

This praise takes in an awful lot of good people. Think of the patriarchs and saints of the Old Testament. Jesus is saying that his kinsman John the Baptist is at least as great as faithful Joseph down there in Egypt, Moses, King David, the prophets Elijah and Jeremiah, the three young men in the burning, fiery furnace, and Daniel in the lion's den. Why, St. Paul was living in that generation, along with Jesus and John the Baptist, but according to Jesus, not even St. Paul was greater than John the Baptist.

Furthermore, Jesus specifies that John the Baptist is the one of whom Isaiah of old had prophesied. We see that prophecy in today's First Lesson from Isaiah 40. Isaiah speaks of someone preparing the way of the Lord:

³A voice cries:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God." (Isaiah 40:3,
RSV)

Then, in Matthew 11, Jesus makes it clear that Isaiah meant John the Baptist. And so we read the words of Jesus:

⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸Why then did you go out? To see a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, those who wear soft raiment are in kings' houses. ⁹Why then did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is he of whom it is written,

‘Behold, I send my messenger before thy face,
who shall prepare thy way before thee.’” (Matthew 11:7-10, RSV)

So, when we are thinking of John the Baptist, we are thinking of a great man.

But also we are thinking of a severe man. John was severe both in his personal manner of life and in his preaching. He did not live in a king’s house, but rather in the wilderness. He did not wear soft raiment, but rather he was clothed with camel’s hair. He did not eat a rich diet, but rather ate locusts and wild honey. I guess the locusts gave him his protein for the day and the wild honey, his carbohydrates. John was an ascetic. He forsook many of the everyday pleasures enjoyed by us humans, for the sake of a spiritual goal. He disciplined himself. He pared himself down, like an athlete casting off unneeded weight for the race. He dedicated himself to one cause: to trying to get Israel ready for the coming of Someone greater than himself. So, John was a man of extraordinary personal discipline.

And his preaching tended to follow the severity of his personal life. Our text says that John was a preacher of repentance:

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Mark 1:4, RSV)

It is not always fun to be a preacher of repentance. It meant that John could pull no punches. He did not gloss over sins. He did not mislead the people into thinking that they were all fine and dandy. No! John was convinced that Someone great is knocking at the door, and that it was high time for the people to get ready for that. He called people to repentance. He called them to turn their lives around and to move in a more holy direction. Not everyone likes being told to repent.

We get a feel for John’s uncompromising preaching in his dealings with King Herod. This is not Herod the Great — the man who had tried to kill infant Jesus through what is called the Massacre of the Innocents. John did not deal with Herod the Great but with one of Herod’s sons called Herod the Tetrarch. This Herod had married Herodias, who had been the wife of Herod’s brother, Philip. It would have been politic for John the Baptist to remain silent before what he considered to be sin, but that is not what John is like. Even when John was imprisoned for preaching that it was not lawful for Herod to have Herodias (Matthew 14), John was unrelenting in his call to repentance. The result was that John was beheaded. It is an awful story.

But it illustrates my point: that John the Baptist was a severe, uncompromising preacher.

And this brings me to a pastoral question in my sermon: Is giving comfort to people compatible with uncompromising clarity? Is comfort compatible with severity?

I am driven to this question by our Isaiah reading. That reading begins with a divine command that there shall be comfort. It is a command that rings throughout heaven to all God's angels and servants. It is a command that echoes in the minds of many of us because of Handel's oratorio *Messiah*:

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.
Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her,
that her warfare is accomplished,
that her iniquity is pardoned.

Then, as if in answer, a heavenly voice speaks of preparing the way of the LORD. And so we read in verse 3:

³A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
(Isaiah 40:3, RSV)

And now, Jesus comes along and tells us that this refers to John the Baptist. This means that the great cry of God to “Comfort ye my people” begins to be fulfilled by a fierce preacher, John the Baptist. We begin with the Lord's cry to “Comfort my people” and we end with the severe preaching of John the Baptist. Hence I have a pastoral question: Is comforting the people compatible with uncompromising clarity? Is comfort compatible with severity?

Well, let me begin by speaking of the awful eavesdroppers. I mean, sin, death, and the devil. I bet that when the Devil heard the preaching of John the Baptist, he said to himself, “Oh, no! This is trouble! I am going to have to get rid of this man.” And if sin and death could speak, I bet they would say the same. They would lament in a bitter way: “Things were going along just fine. We were corrupting human souls, and we were laying them dead in the grave. But this John the Baptist... this man is stirring up the people with hope and with holiness of life. In an unflinching way, John is urging the people to repent and to get ready for Jesus. This cannot be good for us and for our Commander, the Devil.”

And I figure that anything that is bad for sin, death, and devil has got to be good for us — to work toward our comfort.

Anyway, setting aside those devilish rascals, let us note that even in everyday life, uncompromising clarity can be compatible with comfort. Severity can be loving. For example, a young man and a young woman might be comforted by the uncompromising clarity of their wedding vows. And

parents often must be firm in raising their children, to try to save them from harm and to give them a chance for some comfort in life. The severe command, “Do not run out into the street,” is fully compatible with love. Indeed, I think we could say about the how legal structure of a society that in its firmness, it is trying to save people from trouble, trying to save them from prison, trying to keep them from hurting other people.

So, here is John the Baptist — a clear, firm preacher. The divine command ringing from heaven is to comfort, comfort the people. And John begins the fulfillment by severity. He is a preacher of repentance, pulling no punches. He is right to do so, and Jesus seems to praise him for it.

But also, John the Baptist combines his severe call to repentance with the good news that something good is afoot — Someone great is on the horizon. So, he urges the people to repent, but also he gives them an excellent reason for mending their ways. He proclaims a great promise. And so we read the final verses of today’s Gospel Lesson:

⁷And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”
(Mark 1:7-8, RSV)

John does what he can, and can anything more be asked of us? John preaches repentance. John baptizes with water. But he admits that he cannot do what Jesus can do. John himself is not the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world. And John himself cannot baptize with the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist did not live long enough to see the story of Jesus play its way out to victory. John was beheaded before Jesus was arrested, tried, and crucified. And John was beheaded before Jesus rose again from the dead. John, then, did not know the full story of Jesus. In particular, John did not know the holy *thrill* that comes with our faith that Jesus has conquered sin, death, and the devil. You and I get to live in a world that has the risen Jesus in it. John the Baptist did not reach that good world, but he sure did what he could to prepare people for it. And for that, we can praise this handsome man, John the Baptist. He was a man of high integrity. His severity and his uncompromising clarity helped people along — indeed, helped them prepare for the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.