

Mark 1:1-8 The Second Sunday in Advent, series B, Ascension Brandon, Resurrection
Cambridge, Castle End Mission, 2011 Rev. Reg Quirk

And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him – to John the Baptist, that is. Now why was that, I wonder? And my hunch is that they were not only going *to* the wilderness or *to* John. They were also going *from* something. It says that all Jerusalem went out to him. They were leaving the great city, Zion, the temple, which was the very place God was supposed to be. And they were going to the place where perhaps they thought God was. For a thousand years, people had travelled in the opposite direction. They had gone *to* Jerusalem, to the place where God had chosen to make his name dwell there, to the temple, the only place where folk could approach their God with sacrifices and the natural place to meet him with prayer. But these people went the other way. They went out to the wilderness and to a man named John.

But they were not alone. You may have heard of a group of people in that Holy Land called Essenes. We don't speak of them very often, not as frequently as we mention Pharisees and scribes and Sadducees, even Herodians and other such exotic sounding species, because unlike all of those, the Essenes aren't mentioned in the Bible – at least not by name. Certainly my computer knows nothing of them, or else wishes me not to write of them, because every time I write the word "essenes", my spell checker changes it to "essences", which is a different thing altogether. But we know something about them. We know that they did not find God in Jerusalem. They took themselves away into their own communities, where they pursued a more pure life. Perhaps the temple appeared to them corrupt and defiled – after all, that is how Jesus found it. You remember he said, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers." And Jesus took issue with the so-called experts in the law: "They tie up heavy burdens," he said, "hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger." Well he was not the only one to see this, not the only one to be critical of the religion of Jerusalem.

The Essenes removed themselves from it. They duplicated some of the temple rituals, because these were given by God, but they performed them in their own simple and spiritual setting. So those who came out to John, might also, in their way, have been turning their backs on Jerusalem, escaping the holy city where God was supposed to be, and finding the prophet who declared, He is here. The kingdom of God, he said, is at hand.

And the tradition of the essenes has gone on, and goes on still. People take themselves away from what they call organized religion – as if it is a bad thing. Rather than in churches and rituals, they find God in the wilderness - perhaps not literally in the wild places of nature, but at least in some simple and uncomplicated personal prayer, or in a cozy group where their spirituality feels at home. We might say that they have gone out from Jerusalem, much like those who went out to John the Baptist. Perhaps you yourself feel it too – that there is something more immediate, somehow more real and sincere about your prayers at your bedside than those we sing in church. Maybe you do feel closer to God out there in the Wilderness sometimes than you do in here in the temple.

And if you do, that's OK. I do too. It's good to have a relationship with God through Jesus that spills out into what we would otherwise think of as our private lives. It's called having a faith. Jesus certainly encouraged us to pray alone and in secret, "in the closet", as the King James Version puts it. He himself often resorted to lonely places for the very purpose of praying – just him and his Father. It was alone with God in the Garden that he prepared to take away the sins of the world on the cross, there that in agony he prayed so earnestly that his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. Jesus himself drew great crowds into the wilderness to find the authentic voice of God.

But then for Jesus none of this was in conflict with what people call "organized religion". No, in Luke's Gospel we read of a day when he came back home to Nazareth and it includes this telling little sentence: "as was his custom," it says, "he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day". As for the temple, he certainly did not turn his back on that sacred place where God and man may meet. He sought to restore it to what it should be, a house of prayer, and we see that he was angered to find it otherwise. Even though he saw that the days of the temple were numbered, because as he predicted 35 or 40 years later not one stone would be standing on another, still he cleansed it. Then he replaced it with himself. His body was the temple that would be destroyed and rebuilt in three days. He remains the meeting place of God and people, the place where their sins are taken away, and God is truly with them. As for the teachers, he knew their shortcomings. But, he said, they sit on Moses seat, so do what they say, not what they do. They too were a gift of God, and a necessary one.

For Jesus both things went hand in hand – the gathering of God's people on the one hand, with temple and priests, God-given rituals and corporate response; and on the other hand, the quiet and personal devotion; his own prayer and meditation; the private moments with his closest friends; Jerusalem and wilderness were to him alike the place of God. And so it should be for us too. For either thing is incomplete without the other. It would be a shallow

worship in church that did not resonate throughout the week in our own prayer and devotion; but the most devoted life of private prayer on its own has no place for the impetus of God's gifts, his Son's presence in bread and wine, his word proclaimed, his people drawn together to encourage one another and support one another. Either one without the other would be a shadow of what either of them ought to be.

So, to return to my question, why did people go out to John in the wilderness? Funnily enough, Jesus once asked the same question. "He began to speak to the crowds concerning John," the Gospels tell us, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses" – those things would be in Jerusalem if anywhere – "What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you..... and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.'"

This is what they could not find in Jerusalem. This was the man of God with the breaking news – that the kingdom of God is here. Why was he the Elijah who is to come? Not because he was wearing the clothes that Elijah once wore, the camel hair and leather belt; being the wild man of the wilderness was a clue, of course, but it had to do with the promise that closes our Old Testaments: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers.." So Malachi had told, before the Lord comes, Elijah comes. Now figure it out. John the Baptist announces one mightier coming after him; John is Elijah; and after Elijah comes the Lord. No wonder the Kingdom of God is at hand, for the mightier one, Jesus Christ, is none other than the Lord himself come to earth.

What were people to do? If the Lord himself was coming, what must they do? They must prepare his way, like making a straight path through the desert. Their lives, and of course, our lives, may be spiritually parched, like a desert, uncultivated and rough, like a wilderness. Repair them. Restore them. Make them ready to receive the Lord. In other words, repent.

Now John's message was not so one sided. Even if people wanted their lives put right, they have not the power to do it. A person who is weak is impotent to make themselves strong; a person who is sick has no power to will themselves into wholeness; and a person who is estranged from God is the last person to be able to recall themselves and make their life straight. And so John was sent with a gift of God. In the Jordan River he cleansed people of their sins – God did, I mean, not John. It was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Do you think we have anything less? Hardly, we have something more, for John promised that the one coming after him would baptize also with the Holy Spirit, which means that our baptism in Jesus not only cleanses out our sin, but also places the spirit of God within us.

Now we ready ourselves for the Lord's coming. Actually we don't, not really, because he works it within us. But we look now to that act of grace, for the coming Lord to cast out our sin and enter in, and be born in us, as the Carol puts it.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.