

January 10, 2021
by Pastor Dan Hollis
Mark 1:1-11

This week saw a distressing event in the history of our nation, and it follows a year full of distressing events. The sight of an angry mob attacking and even breaching the halls of Congress, a symbol of civil liberties and communal participation... was haunting. This assault on the principles of a free nation was further compounded by loss of life and numerous injuries, and while we have all seen this past year that it could have gone much worse... it was still unacceptable.

I, like many of you, spent hours on Wednesday glued to the images unfolding on the television. I could list, at length, the images that distressed me the most, but I imagine we share those images in common, and I have no interest in reopening fresh wounds.

But I will share one image that left me wondering. It left me a lot more than just wondering, but I wonder if you wonder what I'm wondering.

There was a long moment on the channel that I was watching, while the voices of the journalists trying to make sense of what they were witnessing played in the background, that the camera lingered on a wide shot of the front of the Capitol building. This was after the vanguard of the mob had made themselves at home in the seat of our democracy, and no one knew what was still going on inside. Others were gathered all over the steps of the Capitol, waving flags and holding signs. And in the foreground of this shot, where the camera sat for what felt like an eternity, was a banner someone had draped in a place of prominence that read in bold-as-brass capital letters: "Jesus 2020."

Now I've read my Bible, and at times I find myself questioning if certain people have done the same, because as a follower of Christ I found the association of the statements this mob was trying to make with *Jesus Christ* deeply... disgusting. And that certainly wasn't the most disgusting connection that I made on Wednesday, but it's one that I have the words to talk about, and it's one that I think the Scripture reading I had already planned for today can speak to.

Because this image—along with many in our 21st Century world—made me wonder how the message of Jesus could be so perverted. I wonder what Jesus Christ would have said if he saw that banner with his name on it hung by the people at the Capitol on Wednesday. And that's not just a rhetorical device: I actually have no *idea* what Jesus would have said. I can't properly fathom it. I can usually draw from the Gospels parallels from Jesus' work and words to at least take a *stab* at "what would Jesus say," but Wednesday's acts of terror have left me at a loss.

So to help me—and I hope all of you—wonder, I want to take a moment to consult John the Baptist... a man who *actually* stood for Jesus, in the way whoever hung that banner *claims* to.

[refreshing breath, comforting smile]

See John the Baptist believed he was preparing the way for Christ. By the way, because there are *so* many people named “John” in the New Testament, seminary textbooks decided to abbreviate *this* one as “J-Bap,” which makes him sound like a local radio DJ. “This is J-Bap on Cool 106.9 bringing you the greatest hits of the ‘80s and ‘90s BC all weekend long.” Yeah, he was a weird dude. He lived off the land in clothes of camel-hair, and ate *locusts* and wild honey. He fit well into the Biblical tradition of Jewish prophets as counter-cultural, preaching a word that ran in opposition to the world as he found it.

John spent his ministry baptizing with water—purifying and *preparing* his world for the coming of Jesus. He preached a powerful message, and did powerful work... but he says it himself: I am nothing special. I’m nobody, just doing my job. I’m not what’s important. The message of the one who is coming, *that’s* what you should listen to.

Something that I feel *differs* between John and the people who attacked the Capitol this week is that while the message of *J-Bap* was selfless, a message for the benefit of the desperate masses and on behalf of and inspired by someone greater and more godly than he could ever aspire to be... the messages carried to the Capitol Wednesday were *selfish*. Petulant. A tantrum driven by unsubstantiated conspiracy theories, for the benefit of no one but themselves, on behalf of and arguably inspired by someone who I don’t believe deserves to have the word “great” anywhere near them, not to say *anything* of the word “godly.”

There were no prophets on the steps of the Capitol Wednesday afternoon. There was no-one like John the Baptist, not even the one dressed in animal hair... and banner or not, no one there was preparing the way for Jesus Christ in 2020 or any other year.

“Seminary” is what they call grad school for people who feel called to become ministers. When I started at seminary, I needed to get a job to pay for school—or at least to limit the crippling student-loan debt I was steadily accruing. So I got a job at the dining hall on campus where I lived, and while it was nominally a part-time gig, let’s just say I picked up a lot of overtime hours over the years. My official title was “operational support,” which meant that I needed to be able to do every job the dining hall had, from cashier to dishwasher to prep cook to catering to filling out the dreaded invoices. That meant my first couple of weeks involved a lot of training.

Or at least, that's what it was called. I still remember my first day, when the boss introduced me to her head cook José. José was from El Salvador, if I remember correctly, and he understood English very well; he just didn't speak it very much. José took me into the dishroom and showed me how the various machines worked, where things went, how to replace the different cleaning solutions, and what was expected of the dish person during and between shifts. And he did so almost entirely through grunts and body language.

That was my first week or so, for the most part. José showed me the ropes, walking me through the daily operation of the kitchen, the line, the server, the storerooms, and everything in between. And he did it without saying much. At all.

I really liked José. I think we kind of bonded during those first two weeks. It was a weird experience, but by the end of it we were able to communicate pretty well without, y'know, talking all that much. There was one snow-day where the two of us ran the place ourselves, and we could crank the music in the kitchen as loud as we wanted.

To this day, José's the best cook I've ever worked with, and I've worked with quite a few. He was reliable. A real nose-to-the-grindstone kind of work ethic. He came in early, worked hard all day, cleaned up fast, and disappeared into the night. And he made good food. Dining hall meals aren't usually what you'd call award-winning at a small school, but I really enjoyed the food that came out of that kitchen—which is good, because living and working there I didn't need to do much grocery shopping for myself.

But for all his ability, José wasn't much of a people person. Talking with people made him nervous. He was easily startled, and I noticed his hand would start to get a little tremor if he was trapped in a long conversation.

So he would bury himself in the kitchen as much as he could when he wasn't stuck serving on the line. He once told me he loved when he had to do dishes because, "No people." More power *to* him, I *hated* doing dishes.

Now he wasn't some angry old hermit. He had a good heart and a great sense of humor. It feels good when you can make somebody like that laugh, doesn't it? The thing I remember him saying to me the most was, "You crazy." I got that one from him a lot. What can I say? You've heard me try to make a joke.

When weekends came, he was always happy to be back at work on Monday. And I didn't get that. Why would somebody with his level of social anxiety look forward to coming to work at a place where he had to physically serve people food two out of the three meals a day?

I asked him once, on a Friday when things were dying down. He wasn't looking forward to the weekend. "Boring," he said. So I asked him why he preferred working there

if he didn't like dealing with all the people. And this man of few words, he said, "Food makes people happy. You give them food, they smile. ...Then they go away."

Then it was my turn to laugh and say, "You crazy." But I'm glad I was listening. He didn't have much to say, but what he said meant something. "Food makes people happy. You give them food, they smile." That says a *lot*. And it's something I could picture Jesus saying. Jesus of the loaves and fishes, and the water into wine, and the crumbs at the table, and the Last Supper.

And it's something John the Baptist could have said too, because his whole ministry was to prepare people for the coming of that very Jesus. John is described in our reading today as "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'prepare the way of the Lord.'" One of my favorite songs from the musical *Godspell*: "Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord."

John the Baptist was a voice telling people a message from God: prepare the way of the Lord who is to come, the Christ who will show us to *love God and love one another*.

John the Baptist was living in a time where people were waiting for the Messiah to arrive, and taught those who would listen to prepare the way for him. And when he finally had the privilege to baptize that very Messiah, Jesus Christ, you could *feel* the Spirit in that place. The Spirit of God, well pleased with love overflowing into the hearts of all gathered.

It was far more difficult to feel the Spirit of God in what was happening at the Capitol on Wednesday. And the Spirit I did feel? It was not well pleased. I wonder if you felt the Spirit as I did.

I felt in the Holy Spirit sadness, and comfort in the face of those painful events. I felt some anger too, not the least of which was when I thought to compare the *response* to such a senseless assault... with the far more "*substantial*" response to some of the largely *peaceful* protests we witnessed last year whose *cause*, I dare say, the Bible makes clear would have engendered far more sympathy from Jesus Christ than the tantrum we were subjected to on Wednesday. But if you, like me, overwhelmingly feel *sadness* that things could come to *this*... know that there is little more Biblical than *lament*. Whether it's lamenting injustice or lamenting tragic circumstance, coming before God in a spirit of sadness *means* something, and the God that cries *with us responds* with comfort overflowing. I hope you can feel that too.

So what do we learn from John the Baptist today? What does Jesus, or the Spirit of God place on our hearts about "voices crying out in the wilderness?" To whom do we listen? Which voices truly prepare the way of the Lord, and which voices are getting it so wrong?

For one thing... I look for the Josés. The voices that actually have something Christ-like to say, and are far less interested in tooting their own horn. The voices that remind us of the way of the Lord above anything or anyone else.

José's reminder to me was, "Food makes people happy. You give them food, they smile." It was a message of service, of kindness. Of being a good neighbor. Of dedicating yourself to the happiness of others. Of ensuring that hungry people had good food to spare. That's one big paving stone in the way of the Lord.

If I had not opened my ears to a man who acted like he had nothing to say, I would have missed out on both a friendship and a role model. Who are the voices we should *all* be opening our ears to?

I don't believe it's the voices that stormed the Capitol building. Those voices weren't worthy "to stoop down and untie the thong of Christ's sandals..." but *they* sure didn't think so. They weren't preparing the way of the Lord, they weren't doing the selfless work of righteousness in the face of oppression and evil... they were preparing the way of *themselves*, right through windows and doors and fleeing guards to a bully pulpit and—if their plans had gone their way—perhaps something *worse*.

May we open our ears to hear what the *true* voices of Christ have to say. The J-Baps and the Josés, the Martin Luther Kings and the Mother Teresas... and may we find the courage to *be* those voices from time to time. John the Baptist *is* only one man, after all, and he ate locusts. Listen for the voices from *God*, not just the ones who bought a fancy banner, and speak what must be heard... because God has a lot to say. The Spirit of God has a lot to say to us, even in the midst of everything that took place this week. Crazy... but true. I hope you'll listen with me. Amen.