

## **“Vocational Goals: Camel’s Hair & Locusts?”**

Mark 1:1-8; Isaiah 40:1-11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our faith might be strengthened and we might find peace in your will for our lives. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

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Sometimes I wish the Bible had a Gospel according to John. Oh wait, I guess it does, doesn’t it? Well then, a letter from John. I mean, other than the three we already have. I guess what I really wish is that, first of all, John wasn’t such a common name, at least in Bible times! But more importantly, I wish we knew more about what was going on in John the Baptist’s head and heart. Why did he go out to the wilderness? Did he know what was going to happen? Was he, in fact, Jesus’ cousin, and how aware of each other were they before they met at the Jordan River?

Jesus himself points out later that they had very different approaches. “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” (Mt. 11:18-19) Do you suppose John felt like he’d drawn the short straw?

Our theme for Advent this year is “Abiding in Anticipation.” The idea is that we’re in a moment when something is on the horizon, but we can’t tell what it is yet. We’re waiting, trying to trust that God is doing something, even though we can’t see it yet. And so, each week, we’re looking at scriptures that can teach us something about

how to wait with hope and faithfulness. In Disciples Class, we're exploring some of the spiritual practices that can make times of waiting more fruitful. Today's theme is Peace. The practice we're hoping to learn more about is "letting go of control." And our scriptural companion this morning is Cousin John, with his camel's hair wrap and his meals of locusts and wild honey.

He might not be your first thought for this role. A guy who is confrontational enough to proclaim to people that they need to repent is not necessarily what most of us would call a "peaceful" person. And while he didn't march into the regional capital and try to take charge, he was out there in the wilderness telling people not just to repent, but to get baptized and start living differently. That doesn't exactly scream "I am letting go of control!"

But this is why I wish we had something that told us more about the inner working of John's heart and mind. Because the passionate, pious bossiness was just one side of what was going on. At least according to the way Jesus' disciples recorded it later, John was well aware that he was not the Messiah. He was clear from the start that he was preparing the way for Someone Greater. What's not clear is whether he had any idea what that was going to look like.

While going out into the wilderness and wearing camel's hair may sound a little wild to us, John was actually following his culture's understanding of the traditional path of a prophet fairly closely. Given what little we have of his birth narratives, it's possible he'd been preparing for this all his life. He had been told he was exceptional,

burdened with a special task since he was born. So he found his place in the line of prophets, giving up on a normal home life with wife and children in order to follow this other calling. But did he know any more than that? Did he have any idea what Jesus would do once he arrived on the scene? The gospels show John being surprised and even a little put off when Jesus comes to be baptized by him. It's almost as if John's entire mission was on a "need to know" basis, and that God didn't think he needed to know much.

This is why I think John can actually be a good model for us in learning to let go of control. It seems he had a clear sense of his role and what he was supposed to do, but quite possibly, no understanding of the bigger picture or where it was all leading. I don't know about you, but that's the kind of situation that drives me nuts. I want to know what the end goal is. I want to understand why we're doing it this way and not that way. I want to see how all the pieces fit together.

But there was John, putting himself out there, stepping into a role that couldn't help but draw attention, and doing it with his whole heart. It's not clear how long he had been baptizing before Jesus showed up. It could have been months. Would he have just gone on doing it, if Jesus had somehow been delayed? Did he know when he was coming? Are locusts even in season all year long?

I think sometimes John the Baptist is a hard character for us to relate to. He seems so exceptional, an ascetic, out there doing things that "normal" people would never do, with seemingly no thought for what people would think of him. But here's

the other thing I know: God uses each of us because of who we are, not despite who we are. John the Baptist did what he did the way he did it, because of who he was and the cultural moment within which he was living. God isn't going to ask you to do that, because you're not John the Baptist.

What God is going to ask you to do is the thing that makes sense, given who you are, in your cultural moment, with the gifts and wisdom and personality you have that make you you. What is apparently not promised is that we'll understand how that calling fits into the wider scheme of what God is doing in our world. And when we don't understand why we should do something, we often fail to follow through. We may see what someone else is doing and wonder why that can't be our path. We may wish we had someone else's skills. We may prefer to find a way to do what comes easily, rather than stretching our capacities to meet God's understanding of what we can do.

Just because God won't ask us to do something that doesn't fit who we are, that doesn't mean God doesn't ask us to do hard things. Much of what needs mending in our world is going to require some upheaval to fix. The imagery from Isaiah 40, verse 4 is supposed to inspire us with a vision of God bringing equity and justice into the world. But the actual experience of valleys being lifted up and mountains made low would be quite terrifying, I am sure. We may not like the vast inequalities in our world, but we're used to those who are up high being up high and those who are down low being low down. It's familiar terrain, which is where we prefer to walk.

It turns out that peace, too, requires courage. If we are going to be part of what God is doing in our world – breaking down hierarchies and double standards and hypocrisies and barriers – we’re going to have to withstand some shaking, of the earth under our feet and our own knees. We may not know how the thing we’re being called to do fits in with everything else. We may not be able to see where it’s all going. But if we are to have peace, we must trust. We must trust in the goodness of God; we must trust that leaning on God’s understanding rather than our own will help us know what the next steps are. We must trust that even when we’re crying out the proclamation God has given us and it seems as though no one is listening, that echoes of that gospel will reverberate far beyond our hearing.

It’s okay if we think John the Baptist is a little weird. He probably knew he was a little weird. What’s more important is that he was faithful. And the blessing is that in order to be faithful ourselves, we don’t have to weird like him; we just have to be weird like ourselves, as the beautiful, unique, beloved creatures God made each of us to be. We have to be brave enough to be ourselves and follow Jesus as only we can, each of us, all of us, together. At some level, letting go of control is nothing more and nothing less than proclaiming Jesus is Lord. We are not in charge, for we are disciples of Another. As we abide and anticipate the coming of the Messiah, it is faithfulness that we are called to; it is faithfulness that will bring peace. May it be so. Hallelujah and Amen.