

Sermon, St. David's, Advent 2B, 12/20/2023, Mark 1:1-8 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

As Tammy pointed out in her sermon last Sunday, the season of Advent marks a new church year. Each church year our Sunday readings focus on a different Gospel, and for the next year, our focus will be Mark, with a bit from John, because Mark's gospel is the shortest of the four gospels, launching right into the good news of Jesus Christ the son of God without any sort of birth story. Mark starts right in with John the Baptist, who prepares the way.

So what was with the locusts and wild honey? Even Mark's gospel—the shortest gospel—mentions that strange detail. Since Mark is spare with words, he must have had a reason to include this odd tidbit about John's diet.

Presumably Mark was showing how dedicated John was to his faith, living in the desert and surviving only on what was available there, locusts and wild honey. This suggests that John was an ascetic, meaning he was severely self-disciplined. Some three hundred years later, when Christianity stopped being a fringe religion of the oppressed and became embraced by the Roman empire under Constantine, some practitioners, who became known as "Church Fathers," took to the desert to embrace ascetic practices. But John did it first.

I love John the Baptist and admire his asceticism, but I don't share it. I like nice clothes—this chasuble is my favorite—and I like being inside. I've never eaten a bug, and hope I never will.

I admire what I see as John's scrappiness. I think as a church we can emulate such scrappiness.

Two weeks ago I was in Phoenix and worshipped at the church in which I was baptized, called All Saints. My family left that church for another not long afterwards, so I don't remember All Saints from my childhood, and when in town usually worship at the church in which I was raised. But the church in which I was raised did away with their 8 o'clock service during the pandemic, and All Saints still has an 8 o'clock, so my sister and I decided to go there two weeks ago.

It's a lovely church, with a high ceiling, and pipes from their fancy pipe organ jut out from the wall on either side of the huge cross in an interesting architectural display. I could glimpse a lovely chapel in the back. The church is huge with a marble altar. It was meaningful to worship there.

But I was struck, reading the bulletin and seeing all their activities and resources, by how grateful I am that I worship here and not there. I don't mean for that to sound judgmental. It's a faithful place and I would be happy to worship there again on occasion, but I realized two weeks ago that I am not a big-church Christian.

Years ago at a clergy meeting, a friend asked me how things were going at St. David's. Without thinking I heard myself reply, "We have no money but we gotta lot of Spirit." Then I thought wait, did that just come out of my mouth? Because clergy are supposed to brag to each other about how many people are present on a Sunday and how well everything is going. Admitting that we don't have money was not normal.

My friend looked surprised and serious, then said, "My church has a lot of money, but we don't have a lot of Spirit. I would trade you."

And I said, intentionally this time, "I wouldn't trade."

On Tuesday, the vestry has the annual budget meeting. At other churches I've been a part of, such meetings lasted for hours, sometimes with fierce fighting. I was stunned by my first budget meeting here twelve years ago. "Nobody fought," I said to Marti afterwards, who was on the vestry then as she is now.

She said, "Well, there isn't much money to fight over." She was right. We're still paying off our beautiful parish hall, and we have a small but stellar part-time staff, and there isn't a lot left for anything else.

I'm amazed by what happens in this place despite our lack of funds, and that word "scrappy" rings true. Before my time, when the parish hall was being built, apparently money got tight so members painted the walls themselves. Six years ago our labyrinth was entirely built by volunteers and is now enjoyed not only by members but others in the community.

We collected more Thanksgiving bags of food than we normally have attendees on a Sunday, and we take food to the nearest food bank every month in addition to taking a meal to the HomeAgain men's shelter every month. We are even starting our own little free food pantry that Steve Matthis built that we'll install in the parking lot, so that neighbors can help themselves without having to go through any red tape.

Bigger and richer churches do bigger, splashier things, but my heart is here. We're scrappy, like John the Baptist. While we don't serve locusts and wild honey at coffee hour, we are called to do our best to prepare the way for Christ, especially during this season of Advent, when we prepare for his birth as well as his second coming.

There's a podcast called "Small Churches Big Impact." In their first episode of the new season, they used that word "scrappy" that I associate with both John the Baptist and St. David's. I was struck by something one of them said on that podcast about hope vs. optimism, which she attributed to the late Catholic priest and writer Henri Nouwen. I do not consider myself an optimist and sometimes feel guilty about that as a Christian and as a cancer patient, but distinguishing optimism from hope has relieved me from that guilt.

Optimism is the expectation that things will improve. I am a realist, and I find thinking that things will just get better unrealistic.

But hope, according to this school of thought, is trusting in God's promises to God's people. Now God may not have made us any specific promises about St. David's in particular, but I trust that if we continue to follow Jesus faithfully, we as a church will draw nearer to God. I see God more clearly here, in all of you gloriously imperfect saints, than I do in buildings with sweeping ceilings and marble altars and pipes thrusting out of the walls. I see God in the vestments that were lovingly made by Vee, the table beautifully set by our altar guild, the greens elegantly arranged by the flower guild, and the parking lot that had leaves blown off by Cathy: I see God here. And I have so much hope.

I believe that we will have enough for the next year and am excited for that budget meeting on Tuesday, after spending several weeks worrying about it. Now I think about those Israelites in the desert who collected just enough manna for a day, inspiring "give us this day our daily bread" in the Lord's Prayer. I want to know that St. David's will still be here in three hundred years, but I'm learning to pray for and accept daily bread instead. We'll be OK in 2024, thanks to all of you.

Another podcast I listen to, "Old Books with Grace," had something else to say about hope that resonated with me that I want to share with you. Dr. Grace Hamman said, "Hope is a habit of disciplined longing."¹ I've been thinking about that ever since. A habit of disciplined longing. I may not be an optimist, but I can develop a habit of disciplined longing: for that baby born so long ago who changed the world. For him to come again and save us from the mess our world is in. I can develop a habit of disciplined longing that St. David's will not only serve those of us here today but generations to come.

Advent is a season of hope. How do you hope God will meet you in this season?

¹ "Mary, or Hope: Advent 2023," Old Books with Grace, 12/6/2023, minute 4:33.