



“A Critical Juncture”

Mark 1:1-8

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

December 4, 2011

The year-long celebration of our 125th Anniversary has been marvelous. As we conclude our celebration, we give thanks for all those faithful souls who have worshiped in this holy and awe-inspiring sanctuary and, over the years, made Westminster the magnificent community of faith it is today. It is a day to cheer, a day to raise our voices in celebration! So, who the heck invited the fun-stifling, revelry-wrecking John the Baptist? We’re geared up to shout, “Rejoice!” John the Baptist barks, “Repent!”

John the Baptist is not one of the New Testament’s most attractive figures. Fascinating? Absolutely. But appealing? Not by a long shot.

On the surface, he appears to be the type of person who gives religion a shabby reputation. A crank on the corner bellowing, “Repent and turn away from your sins!” To which we reply, “Now, wait just a minute, Buster. I’m not so bad I don’t steal, kill or commit adultery. I’m not consumed by greed. Why don’t you march over to Wall Street and give the financial folks a blistering?”

While I would be tickled to learn that he actually met up with the financiers who helped push our economy over the cliff and then knocked their heads together, I know it would be unwise to imagine that his message is only for others. He has something to say to us, as well.

So rather than thinking of John the Baptist as a celebration-squelching prophet of doom, it may be more accurate to think of him as an early warning system. His task is to alert us to the dangers ahead if we are not on the right course. He cautions us to stay on our toes so that we will not end up in our waning years, evaluating our lives and concluding, “What a waste. I blew it.”

In October, New York Times journalist, David Brooks, asked people over 70 to send him “Life Reports.” He wanted people whose lives were nearing their final chapters, to send him honest essays assessing their own lives. You might imagine that only people who considered themselves true successes would respond to his request; not so.

One of the respondents was Neil Richard Parnes who segmented his life into four categories: Family, Faith, Community and Self-Knowledge. He also gave himself a grade for

his life. His personal assessment was that he deserved an “F” because his life was more failure and missed opportunity than achievement and pursuing the right goals.

In his “Life Report,” Mr. Parnes talks about his painful childhood and dictatorial father, his inner turmoil and lack of self-confidence. He speaks of his failure as a husband and father, his estranged relationships with his siblings and his empty spiritual life. He laments that he cannot “re-live his life and ‘do it right.’ ” Then, he concludes his essay by saying he was and is: “an Eeyore not a Tigger; a pessimist, not an optimist; an aimless grasshopper, not a purposeful ant; a dreamer, not a doer; a spectator, not a player; a recipient, not a contributor; a loser, not a winner; a coward, not a hero; a father, not a parent; a sad human being, not a happy one.” Then, he ends with these tragic words, “In summation, (I) never amounted to anything...”¹

His is the kind of life that John the Baptist is strongly warning us to avoid. But why share John the Baptist’s warning on the Sunday that we are culminating our year-long celebration?

While this scripture passage is the gospel lectionary reading for this second Sunday of Advent, why not select a psalm of praise and thanksgiving? After all, we have an impressive past to celebrate. Westminster has not been an aimless grasshopper rather than a purposeful ant. Westminster has not slumped into the role of spectator rather than player. For 125 years, the leadership of our congregation has been wise and strong and faithful. Westminster has served as a launch pad for countless young people who began their journey of faith here. Thousands have passed through these doors and discovered God’s purpose for their lives. Men and women have pledged their lives together in marriage and found support when their relationship turned rocky. People of all races, sexual orientations and political leanings have extended care to each other. Individuals have come here when they were treading the valley of the shadow of death, and found the strength and courage they needed to persevere. And, we could never begin to calculate how many hurting people beyond our walls were thrown a life-line by faithful Westminster members who were living Christ’s command to love our neighbor.

Westminster has been a force for good in our society and in other countries. We have an amazing past that cries out to be honored and celebrated. Yet, at the same time, we dare not simply retreat into sweet memories. When the challenges facing us today appear daunting and the future seems filled with too many unknowns, we cannot give in to the temptation to hide in the multilayered quilt of our history.

Our 125th anniversary is an opportunity to celebrate our past and to gain perspective on why we are where we are today. But as we wrap up our celebration we find ourselves at a critical juncture. What next? Where will we go from here?

John the Baptist appeared at a critical juncture in the life of the people of Israel. He wore the garb of the heroes of their past. He dressed like the prophets who had lived centuries before, and the people may have dreamt about their glorious past when they were a mighty nation, did not live under Roman occupation and were not facing so many daily struggles. However, John the Baptist did not want them to dream about yesteryear, so he warned them about the present and pointed to the future.

John spoke of repentance, which some today imagine to mean wallowing in guilt over our failings. But repentance is a warning to assess where we are and to make certain we’re

headed in the right direction so that we don't end our lives full of regrets; so we don't end up like Mr. Parnes summing up our time on earth by saying, "I never amounted to much of anything."

Look again at the opening line in Mark's gospel. He does not say, "Here's the bad news: before Jesus comes onto the scene, we have to hear from John the Baptist who declares 'There's hell to pay for the way you have been living!'"

Instead, the gospel writer says that John the Baptist is the beginning of the *good news*. We tend to think of John the Baptist as the one who shows up at the party at the height of its euphoria and shouts, "Party's over!" But John's intention is not to squash revelry; his purpose is to warn us not to miss opportunities. He does not want us to slowly inch ourselves further and further from the rich life God calls us to live.

God constantly presents us with new possibilities and urges us to become partners in transforming the world. God calls us to step into the voids where compassion is needed, where justice is lacking and where peace is merely a distant dream. God challenges us to explore new visions and to embark on bold, perhaps radical, adventures that will make our lives and the lives of others richer, more satisfying and more joyful.

We stand at a critical juncture today, not simply because we are concluding an anniversary year, but because of the current state of our world. We are in the midst of a global economic crisis that has thrown millions out of work, we're still fighting a war in Afghanistan, millions of children in the horn of Africa are starving, our society grows increasingly secular and attempts to sideline the church, there's increasing rancor in our society as people adopt an "Us" versus "Them" mentality.

We are facing some monumental challenges, but we never give in to bleak despair because the barriers before us appear too immense. Working together with God, we can do amazing things.

Last year at the Congress on World Evangelization in Cape Town, a young woman from North Korea told how her father has been missing for four years. Presumably he has been imprisoned for talking to others about his faith in Christ. She said that despite North Korea's totalitarian regime, she hopes that one day she will be able to speak freely in her country about her faith, and she will be able to help others draw closer to God, but currently that prospect is dim.

After she spoke, a man attending the conference from the Old East Germany came up to her and put a gift in her hand: a chunk of concrete. She gave it a puzzled look, and he said, "This is a piece of the Berlin Wall, and I want to give it to you as a sign of what God can do in seemingly impossible places."²

As followers of Christ, we are people of hope. We do not give up because the problems seem too great. We have something to say about the widening gulf between rich and poor. We refuse to endorse our society's casual acceptance of greed and its apathy toward people on the margins. We will take the lead in showing others that religious faith need not be something that divides us. We will respect people of other faiths and pursue common ground that enriches lives.

Although we have 125 years behind us, we are no where close to the end. God has worked great things through Westminster members long before any of us arrived on the scene, God continues to work through our ministry and mission today, and God will continue to work through our church family to make Westminster an even more compelling force in the future.

We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. We are far from the end of the road because God is not finished with us.

Today, we celebrate 125 fabulous years. Tomorrow we look to the future.

NOTES

1. David Brooks, "Life Reports II," *The New York Times*, The Life Report: Neil Richard Parnes, November 28, 2011.
2. Leighton Ford, "Hope-Holders: Notes and Reflections on Preaching Hope in Advent" in *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2011, p. 22

125th Anniversary Prayer ~ December 4, 2011 Worship Service By The Reverend Dr. Anne R. Ledbetter

Holy and merciful God, we are deeply grateful for this church, planted over 125 years ago, through the inspiration of your Spirit and the faithfulness of our forebears.

We thank you for its rich and remarkable history, not untouched by wars, economic turbulence or social upheavals. We praise you for your church universal and for Westminster's place within the worldwide body of Christ.

Guided by elders and deacons, pastors and trustees, Westminster has been a beacon of hope for the disconsolate, a refuge for the needy, a voice crying justice for the oppressed, and a community in quest of peace.

We bless you for women of Westminster who have supported missionaries, taught church school, provided ministries of care and hospitality, and organized the Annual Bazaar to benefit outreach.

O God who is continually coming into our world and into our lives, grant us this day your wisdom, your hope, and your peace.

***Come and fill our hearts with your peace. You alone O Lord, are holy.
Come and fill our hearts with your peace. Alleluia!***

Gracious God, we thank you for this sanctuary, now a century old, and we bless you for all the prayer and praise, witness and service, which have reverberated within this space, and been carried beyond these walls.

We give you thanks for children, youth and adults who have passed through the waters of baptism to new and eternal life,

for all who have had their relationships solemnized in covenant love and fidelity,

for teenagers and people of every age who have made their public profession of faith in Christ,

for faithful stewards who have given sacrificially of their time, talent, and treasure so that this church could grow in its physical plant and spiritual worship, education and service,

for all who have been fed here by worship, education and eucharist,

for all who in this place have found strength to persevere, mercy to forgive, courage to change, salve to heal their broken-spirits,
for all the Westminster saints who sought to love you with all their heart, soul, mind and might, and whose presence still enlivens our faith and emboldens our witness.
As our celebratory year comes to a close, we pray for your ongoing wisdom, inspiration, and peace.

***Come and fill our hearts with your peace. You alone O Lord, are holy.
Come and fill our hearts with your peace. Alleluia!***

Eternal God, in this holy season of Advent, we are filled with anticipation of your birth among us – in an infant, in the Word made flesh,
in valleys raised up, and rough places made smooth,
in comfort for the bereaved and healing for the sick,
in justice for the downtrodden, and light for all who live in darkness.
Having voiced gratitude for our history, and rejoiced in your ongoing grace,
we pray for your wisdom and guidance today as we seek to be your faithful people in this corner of the world. In the years ahead grant us
your encouragement in our discipleship,
your consolation in our defeats, and
your challenge to our complacency.
We praise you for revealing your glory in Jesus the Christ, in whom you have shown us your way, your truth and life. Embolden us to live in the strength of his love and compassion, and in the wisdom of his justice and peace. For you are and ever will be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, the one for whom our hearts hunger and thirst, and so we pray...

***Come and fill our hearts with your peace. You alone O Lord, are holy.
Come and fill our hearts with your peace. Alleluia!***

Hear us as we join our hearts and voices in the prayer Jesus taught his followers, saying,

Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.