

Sermon Text: Mark 1:1-8

My old college roommate teaches biology at Greenville Tech, and for a while, they had a snake in his laboratory. When it was time for the snake's feeding, the freshmen students would gather around and stare in rapt silence. Once, my friend, the instructor, said to the class, "You know, I'm jealous of that snake. I never get that kind of attention from my class." A student perked up and said, "You would if you could swallow a mouse!"

John the Baptist, somebody liked that, John the Baptist got people's attention. John the Baptist is like that eccentric, unpredictable uncle we all have, who shows up at your family gatherings. Shake your head yes if you have one. I do. Everyone holds his or her breath because he has no politeness filter. He says outrageous things. You know the type. The worst part about the outrage is that the impolite things he says are mostly true. John was saying it doesn't matter who you are, who your father was, who your mother was, what position you hold in the church, it is time to repent, and be ritually washed as any outsider would be. You see, a washing, a baptism, Jewish folks reserved for an outsider, an unclean person, who was coming into the community, and John was doing it for people, who were already, more or less, following God's laws, more or less. At least, they knew God's laws, or at least they had sense enough to feel guilty about the fact that they knew God's laws, and they were not following God's laws. Kind of like us!

John is where we get the saying, "Don't lose your head!" It is. For telling the truth so bluntly, "You must turn, repent, and you must return to God!" Because of his boldness, he literally lost his head. Here we are just before the table of Communion where we remember what the world did to Jesus, who came preaching a similar message, return to God, return, you selfish, prodigal, starving out there in the wilderness, eating pig slop, return and find God waiting with open arms to embrace you. For that message, they nailed Jesus to a cross.

If we're going to sneak up on joy in this short message, we'd better do it quickly. John was indeed the fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah, the voice crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight! Now we know that our paths are not so straight. We wander too often in the wilderness of materialism and fear of terrorists and anthrax in the mail, and around this time of the year, we tiptoe around potential family blow ups, and then we wonder when there is a divorce among our friends, which of the friends will we get in the divorce, to whom do we send Christmas cards. We struggle with grief and loss. We struggle with disease and temptation and guilt, real and imagined. Yet we sing and we want joy, more than anything else, deep in our souls we hunger for a real presence and a real peace that will break up the patches of anxiety in our hearts the way a good cough clears your lungs. You know when you have a really good cough when you have a cold, and you feel fresh air touching some part of your lungs that hasn't had air in a long time. I love that feeling. We want peace and joy that break up the patches of anxiety and fear in our hearts. We know there is joy out there somewhere, but most of us have lived long enough to know that is not in the things we can own or the things we can touch or see or drink or taste. We tried it, and it got us nowhere.

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

December 4, 2005

We are more than any generation before us, and yet, I am reminded of the old Beatles' song. So many are like the nowhere man making nowhere plans for nobody. There is emptiness in our age. God wants you to know that in Christ you are somebody. You are saved. You are healed. You are forgiven. God wants you to rise above the level of nowhere existence, nowhere existence where you can keep your head, and you can more or less behave and yet lose your soul!

God in Christ has given us the means to see life from an entirely different dimension, and John's very real call still speaks because we are still selfish sinners, looking down the wrong road. The solution is still return, that means repent, to turn back to God, allow God's spirit to cleanse us and to change us. We are all thirsty in our souls. We are all looking for that water from a deeper well. God loves us even as we are, but make no mistake about it, God means to change us, to grow us, into the likeness of Christ, to redirect us away from self and back to God's self as the spill point, the touchstone of our existence. Repent means turn back to God, and the spirit gives us power and comfort and guidance to lug over hills in our lives the impediments and to fill in the potholes and to travel in a Godward direction, away from the self addiction all the days of your life as you grow and change and give yourself. Now some people will think you are odd for doing so, but you'll know where you're going, after God.

John was not offering God politely as one option out of many, the way celebrities embrace Scientology one year, and then the next year, Kabala is the hot religion of the day. He was saying, listen sinners; God is doing a brand new thing. God is coming. Your Savior will make Him known. Get ready for what is real, for what matters, for what God had planned from the very beginning. People today, as well as then, are starving for lasting truth. We cover up. We deceive. We deny. Always deep inside, there is a desire to change and to grow and to know the truth, to be in union with God, and also to be connected with other people, to be able to love, to be able to forgive, to be able to trust. John said, sinners, listen up, regardless of who you are or what you've done, or how high or how low your self-esteem, there is room for you at the table, and all human kind will see God's salvation. Yes, John was fierce, but he was sneaking up on the good news, the joy of God's coming in Jesus Christ, and part of that good news is that change is possible! Change is possible! No one is beyond the reach of this gracious, forgiving God who comes to us so that we might come to Him.

There is an old movie entitled “The High and the Mighty.” In that movie, there is a flight over the ocean, and the pilot's voice comes over the intercom, and says, “We've got a problem, and we can't correct it. We are not going to make it. I'm announcing to everybody on this plane just so you can prepare yourselves for the inevitable.” In that movie, there is an elegantly dressed lady, and she begins to remove a diamond brooch from her neck and a large ring from her finger, and she peels off some false eyelashes, and then she removes the makeup revealing a scar on her forehead, which has always been there, but always been concealed. She is preparing herself for the end, and she wants to go as she really is. It turns out in the movie that they do make it to the airport,

## “Sneaking Up on Joy”

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

December 4, 2005

but the woman is changed forever. She had taken off her mask and become whom she really was. Become who you really are, and come to this table not out of rote ritual, but come with repentance, a return to God. Come seeking water from that deeper well, the water, which is that spirit within welling up to eternal life, changing us, and the way we feel and the way we see and the way we relate to others. He has come, and is coming. The message of Advent. He stands at the door of your heart and knocks. Open to Him, open fully wide the door of your heart. Open to God in Christ your heart. The Magi, when they celebrated the birth of a savior, they brought wonderful gifts, the best they had. Bring your best gifts to this Communion table. Bring your heart, your body, your soul, which is, when you think about it, what Jesus brought to us. Only God can make us into what we were meant to be, children in the likeness of our Heavenly Father. Come empty. Come hungry, and see if God doesn't meet you here. Amen.