

HOMILY - SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT "B" 12-10-2017

Have you ever received a Christmas card with John the Baptist's words written on it: "Prepare the way of the Lord"? Probably not! But isn't it interesting that Saint Mark and the Church places him center stage on this second Sunday of Advent? Maybe that is because John the Baptist is the very voice of Advent, the voice that points to Jesus as the One to transform our lives.

I have always been intrigued by the biblical figure of John the Baptist. He clearly knew what his job description was: "to prepare the way of the Lord". He humbly knew who he was: "I baptize you in water for repentance – the one who comes after me is more powerful than I ... I am not fit to carry his sandals". He was not afraid to be a bit counter-cultural by living like a hermit in the desert and wearing a garment made of camel-hair with a leather loin-cloth round his waist. He also was not timid in saying what needed to be said: "Brood of vipers – produce fruit in keeping with repentance".

But there is one thing about John the Baptist that I do not like. That is his weird diet. It makes me almost choke when I think of eating locusts and wild honey. Honey maybe but locusts would tip me over the edge. I can understand food was not in great supply in the wilderness- but certainly John could have at least packed some better things to eat before hanging out in the desert. I do find it interesting though that Matthew chooses to mention this strange diet. There must have been a reason.

In the Bible, locusts and honey are often mentioned. Locusts are associated with plagues – think of Moses and the nine plagues brought down on Egypt – one of the nine was locusts. The prophet Joel predicts a plague of locusts coming to Israel. Biblically, locusts have a negative connotation. They have and continue to bring ruin, upheaval, loss and pain.

Knowing that, why did John choose to eat locusts? Maybe John was telling us to admit that loss and pain often can be a part of our life. There is a tendency to deny that part of ourselves. "I'm not upset", "I'm not hurt" and "I don't care". But to deny them only intensifies them. If we try to flee from pain and discouragement, they follow us and eventually wear us out and lessen our lives. John the Baptist calls us to honesty. Are you dismayed? Admit it. Are you hurt? Claim it. Have you lost someone you loved? Begin to grieve. Take the locust and swallow it down.

Locusts in, themselves, do not complete John's meal. That is why John also eats honey. Honey in the Bible is often referred to as the flavor of God's word. God gives Ezekiel a scroll with the word of God written on it and tells Ezekiel to eat it. When he eats it, it is as sweet as honey. The Psalmist tells us that God's word, God's law, is like

honey on the tongue. Honey can be a symbol for our faith – for the sweetness of belief. It tells us that God is real, that God can be trusted; God is both our savior and our healer. It is only through the sweetness of God's presence that we can be healed and we can hope.

Keep in mind however – the important thing about John's diet is that it was composed of both locusts and honey – both honesty and faith. Both of these foods are necessary for a complete meal. Like love and marriage – they both go together. If we try to live our lives only with honesty, it is not enough. It is good to admit that I am hurt; I am dismayed, I am in need. But that only takes us so far. We must add faith. We must taste the sweetness of God's presence and claim the God who is with us, so that we can face the future with hope.

On the other hand, a life that only has faith is not enough. It is great to believe God is real, that God is with us, and that God will save us. If we do not claim our own brokenness, our own discouragement, our own need, we do not know who we are. It is only when we can admit how much we need God's presence that we can open ourselves to God's saving grace.

Today's Gospel invites us to adopt the diet of John the Baptist, the whole thing, locusts and honey. Are you discouraged? Are you hurt? Are you grieving? Then claim it, admit it, swallow it down. Say, yes, this is the person that I am. And then, turn to the sweetness of God's presence. It is that presence that will encourage you and heal you. Loss and pain cannot be carried without God's presence. Locusts cannot be digested without the honey of God's word and mercy.

Closing Story

There was a man who was a real golf enthusiast and it started raining terrible. So he couldn't go play golf as he usually did at this hour and he was bored to death because he had nothing to do. He was sitting around in the house and he heard a knock on the door. He opened the door and found a well-dressed man standing there who said, "Hello sir, I am a Jehovah Witness." So the man said, "Lord, should I invite him in?" So he said, "Come on in and sit down." He offered him a fresh cup of coffee and asked, "What do you want to talk about young man?" The young man looks at him and he said, "Beats the heck out of me, nobody has ever invited me in before."