

Willow Glen UMC      December 4, 2011    John the Baptist  
Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,  
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
    who will prepare your way;  
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
    ‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
    make his paths straight,’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

[pastor puts on camel's hair and holds up a bag of fried locusts] Why am I doing these weird things? Other than intentionally embarrassing my daughter. My friends, I'm doing these weird things to illustrate that when you let God into your life, weird things happen. It's like being in the twilight zone just before the dawn. When you've been living in the dark, just a little bit of light changes the whole landscape and it can be pretty disorienting.

When you first start hearing God and listening to God and aligning your life with God, pretty soon the rest of the world thinks you're really strange. It's like a drunk giving up the bottle. It's amazing how different the world looks when you're

sober. And everyone who's used to being around you doesn't want to be around you. Because you're going straight. And you're acting strange.

Believe me, it's even weirder when you start following Jesus, when you stop putting yourself front and center in your life, because God belongs there. You can't get more counter-cultural than that. So Christians have to live with a lot of cognitive dissonance in their lives. They have to do the dance—surviving in this world while not violating the rules of God's world. It takes some tricky steps, some fancy footwork. It looks a little strange. We might as well be wearing camel's hair or eating fried locusts.

To a lot of people, Scott Kennedy acted pretty strange. He grew up in this church and came of age in the 60's. At the start of the Vietnam War, he was involved in Conference youth events and, through Bob Cary, got to know Jesus as the Prince of Peace. Consequently, he became a pacifist and a conscientious objector, which was much worse than eating locusts. Many faulted his politics, but you can't fault his passion or his intention of following the Jesus he had come to know.

He married Kris Champion in this church, and in 1976 they started a nonviolent community, a commune. Again, just living as early Christians did in the Book of Acts. That year, Scott was one of the many co-founders of the Resource Center for Nonviolence in Santa Cruz. Though he served as its long-time director, he never took more in hourly pay than the part-timers on his staff. How many of us can say that? Not me. I don't think I've ever met anyone else with as much integrity.

Scott worked for over 30 years to bring peace to the Middle East. Now everyone else would consider that a hopeless cause. Why try to teach methods of nonviolent social change to people whose lives have, for centuries, been saturated in violence? But hopeless causes are the only ones worth living or

dying for. After all, Jesus lived and died for us, a hopeless cause if there ever was one!

So, what are we to do? Listen. John the Baptist will give us a clue:

Luke 3:7-14

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

[remove camel's hair] We are stones. That is, we are as dead as stones unless we let the living Spirit of God animate our spirits. The people of Israel were dead in their sins. John the Baptist came preaching repentance. He told them that just being blood relations of Abraham was no guarantee for them. God could raise up stones to be children of Abraham.

And therein lies our hope. If God can raise up stones to be children of Abraham, God can surely raise us up. God can make us true children, not by ancestry, but by grace. Just as in Ezekiel's vision where God made dem bones rise again, God can

make us live again. Even with rocks in our heads and stones in our souls, God can make us alive to the possibilities for peace and for justice, for joy and and for hope, not only for us, but for the whole world. If we don't believe that, then our God is too small or our expectations of God are far too low.

For me, Scott Kennedy was one of those living stones. Picture the Palm Sunday procession: Even if the Pharisees had managed to convince Jesus to shut up the crowds, Scott would still be there with all the other stones crying out for the kindom of God.

What then are we to do? As living stones, we can start paving the road to the kindom now: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

This Christmas, we have lots of opportunities as living stones to cry out, to proclaim Christ and to tell the whole story of his life and to pave the road to the kindom with his love. I want to share a song with you that tells the whole story. It's a poem by the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, Richard Wilbur. It makes this stone want to cry.

A stable lamp is lighted  
Whose glow shall wake the sky;  
The stars shall bend their voices,  
And every stone shall cry.  
And every stone shall cry,  
And straw like gold shall shine;  
A barn shall harbor heaven,  
A stall become a shrine.

This child through David's city  
Shall ride in triumph by;  
The palm shall strew its branches,  
And every stone shall cry.

And every stone shall cry,  
    Though heavy, dull, and dumb,  
        And lie within the roadway  
    To pave His kingdom come.

Yet He shall be forsaken,  
    And yielded up to die;  
        The sky shall groan and darken,  
And every stone shall cry.  
And every stone shall cry,  
    For stony hearts of men:  
        God's blood upon the spearhead,  
    God's love refused again.

But now, as at the ending,  
    The low is lifted high;  
        The stars shall bend their voices,  
And every stone shall cry.  
And every stone shall cry,  
    In praises of the Child  
        By whose descent among us  
    The worlds are reconciled.