

MESSAGE for Dec 4, 2011

Mark 1:1-8

Miracle in our Messiness

The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller

Last Saturday, Amber, Simon, Thea, and I spent the day at my sister's 54 acre farm in Bedford County. They call it a "gentleman's farm." It's where we have our family get-togethers. So 22 of us got together for Thanksgiving at the farm. The day was absolutely beautiful. The food was awesome. I ate too much as I often do at our family get-togethers. It was great to hangout with family. We have so much to be thankful for.

We got to talking about farm life with my sister, Lisa. She and her husband, Scott have a few cows, a horse, chickens, a small orchard, a big garden, a couple four-wheel ATVs with lots of trails in the woods for riding and hiking.

Amber and I found ourselves dreaming about having a farm like that some day. We both love animals and so do our children. We love being outside and so do our children. Amber especially likes the animal part. Thea especially likes the horse part. Simon and I especially like the ATV part.

My sister, Lisa, says that she loves every part of the farm except "the mucking out part."

I said, "The what?"

"The mucking out part – the cleaning-out-the-barn part."

I asked, "Who does that?"

"We all do," she responded.

Here is the tool of choice for mucking out the barn... (*Hold up the pitch fork*).

Anyone who has lived on a farm with animals knows what it means to "muck out" the barn. To "muck up something," means you make a mess of something. So if you are to "muck out the barn," that means you clean out all the mess, all the dirt, all the manure. Mucking out the barn doesn't sound like much fun. And I know from experience it isn't. Ask any farmer.

Every summer during my college and seminary years I worked at the Bedford Country Fairgrounds. We would spend the summer getting ready for the fair, which took place the first full week in August. When the fair was over we would spend at least a week "mucking out the barns," all 10 of them; ten barns that housed hundreds of animals during fair week. It's hard, heavy, dirty, stinky work. And it was necessary.

I found myself wondering, if Jesus was born around animals, and laid in a manger, who mucked out the stable? Somebody did, I'm sure. I would think, I would hope, that before Mary gave birth in that stable, somebody made the place a little more presentable, a little more tolerable for the birth of her first child.

I wonder who did the mucking? Who did the cleaning up in preparation for the coming Christ child?

In our reading today we meet a strange guy named, John the Baptist. He appears in the wilderness, we're told. Picture a barren wasteland, nothing lives or grows in the wilderness. It's the complete opposite of a well managed farm. Oddly enough in the Bible a lot of important things happen in the wilderness.

For 40 years Moses led the people in the wilderness. I never understood why it would take so long to get from slavery in Egypt to the freedom in the Promised Land, until I realized that for God it's not the destination that's important it's the journey. It took 40 years to purge the people of their sin and form them into the kind of people God needed for God's kingdom work in the Promised Land.

Most us hate (my mother always told me to never use the word "hate" but in this case it's appropriate), most of us hate being in the wilderness and yet that is where God works best. Why, because in the wilderness we must depend on God.

That's what John is doing in the wilderness. John is calling people to depend on God. He takes people on a spiritual journey of preparation for what God is about to do in the world through Jesus. John calls people to repent, to be baptized, to depend on God.

Baptism wasn't new. God's people had practiced ritual washings for hundreds of years. But John's baptism was different. It's a one-time event. It's a spiritual re-birth. It wasn't some ritual for external cleansing; it's an external symbol of an internal change of heart. It was a life-transforming event. I wonder if we have watered down the importance of Baptism.

John called people to make a change on the inside – to repent – to do a u-turn – to turn around – to reorient their lives away from a dead end situation called sin and instead depend on God. To get a new direction for life... To get ready for what God was about to do in their lives through Jesus...

Mark quotes the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, saying, *"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.'"*

In biblical times, when a king traveled to another part of his kingdom, a messenger would go out in advance and announce that the king was coming. The people were told to get ready, to prepare, to especially prepare the roads. They were to fill in the ruts and level the hills to make the way smooth and straight for the coming king.

That's what John the Baptist is doing. He is preparing the way for the coming King. But this is no ordinary king. This is the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Savior of the world, the Son of God. This is Jesus.

John wasn't calling people to prepare the roads. He was calling them to prepare their lives. He called them to clean up all the sinful mess in their lives, to make room for Jesus. Put another way, John was calling the people to muck out their lives.

If I were to ask you, how are you getting ready for Christmas this year? You would probably respond the same way I would with a long list of things to do.

Presents to buy,
 presents to wrap,
 a tree to cut down,
 a tree to put up
 decorations to put up,
 lights to put up
 cards to address,
 cards to mail
 parties to attend,
 sermons to write,
 cookies to bake,
 cookies to eat,
 shopping to do
 and the list goes on and on. Does that sound familiar to you?

Now, please don't get me wrong. I am not a Mr. Grinch or a Mr. Scrooge. I absolutely love this time of year. And there really isn't anything wrong with doing those things on our to-do-list. But it does cause me to wonder how my preparations for Christmas seem to *fill up my life*, when John the Baptist is clearly calling me to *clean out some things in my life*.

I can't help but wonder if I'm mucking up my life while John is calling me to muck it out.

Question: Do our Christmas preparations help us or hinder us from getting ready for Jesus to come into our lives this year? That's the question...

Now, here's the amazing thing. Jesus shows up in our lives anyway. Jesus is the miracle in the muck and mess of our lives. Jesus lived, died, and lives again because of the muck and mess in our lives AND because we can't muck out our lives on our own. We need his help.

So Jesus comes. He comes and he grabs the proverbial pitchfork and he starts pitching with us. And we respond by saying, "Thank you, Jesus!" As he and his love for us motivates us to join him in cleaning up our lives.

I hope the words of John the Baptist ring in your ears this year as he invites us, calls us, challenges us to repent, to muck out our lives not because we have to or because Jesus won't show up if we don't, but because in doing so we prepare a place for him to come and dwell with us.

How might we do that? How might we get ready for Jesus' coming? By using this tool of choice... (*Hold up the Bible*).

Now I know that the Bible isn't easy to understand. That's why two weeks ago we made available a 40 day Devotional for Advent and Christmas... to help Keep the Holy in our Holidays (*hold up sheet*). Copies of this resource are outside the church office and on our webpage.

Many people have shared with me these past two weeks how they have enjoyed using this resource to help them get ready spiritually for Christmas this year. And who needs to do that? We all do.

Repent then – get ready then – clean up then. May we prepare the way of the Lord straight to our hearts this year. Amen.