

The sermon is based on this Bible text:

Mark 1:1-8^{NRSV} The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" ⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ 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. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Once there was a church badly in need of repainting. It was a wood clapboard church, so the entire outside needed paint—peeling, cracking, blistering. There were plenty of volunteers to apply the paint, the problem is that the maintenance budget only had enough money to buy one gallon of paint. So the property committee decided to make an appeal to the congregation one Sunday, and people gave money to buy more paint. But even though people had given some more money, it still wouldn't buy nearly enough paint to cover the entire outside of the church. What to do . . . paint only one side of the church and come back next year to do the rest? No, the entire church needed paint desperately. Go back to the congregation for more money? No, they've already given what they're going to. Finally the committee realized that while there wasn't enough money to buy all the paint they needed, they could afford to buy enough paint thinner to make that one gallon stretch and cover the whole church. The meeting adjourned and on Saturday the volunteers painted. On Sunday the congregation arrived to see the newly-painted church . . . and it looked terrible! There was no way one gallon of paint mixed with a bunch of gallons of thinner would ever cover well enough. You could barely tell that anything had been done. When it came time for the sermon, before the preacher could start a loud voice came from the sky, "REPAINT! REPAINT and THIN NO MORE!"

John the baptizer appears in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord, preaching a baptism of repentance. Lots of people respond to John's message, confess their sins and are baptized. I told a joke about repentance because to some people repentance is a laughing matter. You've seen the stock character in cartons: a character with a beard, dressed in some kind of robe, and carrying a sign that says, "Repent." Now it's fine to have a sense of humor about matters of religion—we'd be in big trouble sometimes if we didn't—but a sense of humor can't get in the way of our being straightforward and earnest when that's called for.

Jedediah Purdy is a professor of law at Duke University and the author of a number of books. Purdy spent most of his childhood away from the influence of popular culture on a remote farm in West Virginia. His parents made a deliberate choice to move there, and they

naïve devotion, belief, or even hope. Nothing is left to delight, move, inspire, or humiliate us. There are no surprises because, he writes, “Everything we encounter is a remake, a rerelease, a ripoff or a rerun.” “The point of irony,” he says, “is a quiet refusal to believe in the depth of relationships, the sincerity of motivation, or the truth of speech—especially earnest speech.” Irony is “all spin, all the way down.” Each of you can think of examples of this loss of earnest speech. My favorite is the (non-) apology by a public figure: “I’m very sorry and deeply regret that you took offense at what I did.” Not, “I’m sorry for what I did,” but, “I’m sorry you took offense.”

I’m sure there were people in the time of John the Baptizer who had lost the ability to speak earnestly and truthfully, but thankfully John wasn’t one of them. Absolutely straightforwardly he proclaimed his message. He didn’t dress for success or eat power lunches with VIPs, and some people probably laughed at him and made jokes about him. But John spoke earnestly. He was there not to serve his own interests, but to get things ready for someone greater to come: “I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.” Not good enough to shine his shoes, we might say.

Earnest speech like John’s is becoming rarer and rarer in our society, maybe because earnest speech takes a risk. Yet earnest speech like John’s is what we desperately need. The journalist Ann Medlock founded an award called “The Giraffe Heroes Project” to recognize people who speak up with courage on behalf of others and work for justice.² There are almost 1000 giraffes worldwide, including a number here in the New York area. Let me tell you about just a few. Muriel Clark became New York City’s oldest undercover agent at the age of 78, when she helped the police expose nursing home companies that were demanding payoffs to place the elderly. Her work led to the first indictments for this practice. The civil war in Sudan displaced countless refugees, including so-called Lost Boys orphaned by the fighting. Two of them met here in New York, and despite being from rival tribes that hated each other back in Sudan, joined together to raise funds to dig wells and help rebuild their nation. Doug Lasdon graduated first in his law class and could’ve taken his pick of posh law firms to work in. Instead, he founded New York’s Legal Action Center for the Homeless, setting up combination soup kitchens and legal clinics and training others to expand the work. Back in the early days of AIDS, people weren’t sure exactly how the virus was transmitted and there were no effective treatments. People with AIDS often became not only impoverished but isolated. Jane Best helped found the “God’s Love, We Deliver” program to bring meals to AIDS shut-ins. And this being New York, they were five-course gourmet meals!

If being earnest is sticking your neck out like a giraffe, then being ironic is more like a turtle. You can stick your neck out a little bit but pull immediately back into the safety of your shell when you want to. Thanks be to God that in Advent we await the coming of the One who stuck his neck out . . . stuck it out fully . . . stuck it out all the way to the Cross, for our sake.

¹ New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999. The quotations are from page 10.