

"THE MAN IN THE CAMEL HAIR COAT"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
November 30, 1997

## PREFACE

Sermon titles are important and they are also "tricky"...they can turn people "on" or turn people "off"....even before you get started.

I wish to thank Walter Gerbereux for today's title, "The Man In the Camel Hair Coat". He probably remembers the book and the movie of the nineteen forties starring Gregory Peck, "The Man In the Gray Flannel Suit".

George Leopold also had a title suggestion which I almost went with...."Not Everyone's Cup of Tea" suggested George at last Sunday's coffee hour, but there was something about the juxta-position of title and my name (on the same line) that worked against it, at least in my mind...

I started out ten days ago with a title that was far too long, "The Camel Hair, Locust Eating Preacher"....yes, too long. It wouldn't fit on the bulletin line.

'Course...some will say, why not just go with "John", or with "John, the Baptist", or with "The Preacher in the Wilderness". I used that one 25 years ago and again, something about the juxta-positioning of my name and title made me just a bit uncomfortable. But...

LET US PRAY....

## "THE MAN IN THE CAMEL HAIR COAT"

### INTRODUCTION

Go back to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade of a year ago. It was moving along nicely toward a fevered climax. NBC had shown marching bands and recording artists "lip synching" their latest recording in the middle of Broadway. Those massive balloons of "Bullwinkle" and "Underdog" and the frenzied pitch of the announcer's voice made it obvious that Santa and his Reindeer were just a block away. Just about then a small float came wheeling down Broadway with the Wise Men, the Shepherds, Mary, Joseph and the Baby Jesus. It was then that the announcer, Willard (what's His name) shouted...

"And here come the Ones who got the whole thing started!"

And that's about all that there was to be said! "Here come the ONES who got the whole thing started!" Don't you love it? But how can Mary, Joseph and a baby compete with Kenny Rogers and Rudolph and Bullwinkle? The Holy Family occupies but a small float in the "passing parade", and yet....more and more people are returning each year to the Church and to the historic faith...because we are finding out that we need to know more about the straw in the stable than we do about the tinsel on the tree. We need Emmanuel. We need to know, "What child is THIS who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?" Emmanuel. God with us!

### DEVELOPMENT

It's slightly inappropriate to say, "Here come the ONES who got the whole thing started!" about the Holy Family, but that is an acceptable statement to make regarding John, the Baptizer and his relationship to Jesus. For when John appeared in the wilderness,

"Preaching a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins",

he truly was the one who got the whole thing started for Jesus. So, let's think about John here this morning for a few minutes. It is John who broods over this First Sunday of Advent.

When we stop to consider John the Baptizer, we can't help but notice his rather distinctive apparel and diet. He wore "a garment of camel's hair...and his food was locusts and wild honey". If you and I were to go down to Brooks Brothers, we could buy a beautiful camel's hair sport coat or top coat. They're in style. At least, it's called camel hair, but it wouldn't bear much resemblance to the coat that John was sporting...back there by the Jordan River...

We've seen camels in the zoo or perhaps ridden one on a trip to Egypt. Now believe me, John's not wearing a sport coat. His garment is tangled, matted and rugged. Can you imagine the impact that John made by wearing that coat and eating locusts? I don't think we'd invite him to stop by for a cup of coffee or if he came in and sat next to us in the restaurant, we'd probably feel uncomfortable. To our ears he sounds just a bit weird, but the Scriptures tell us that all of Judea and the area around Jerusalem went out to hear him...even Herod, the King. He didn't need to go to them. They came to him. Why? Was he a curiosity? A freak? Something for the press to gobble up? A first century "Macarena" - popular for a season, but then soon forgotten? Would he end up on the back pages of People magazine under the banner, "Camel Hair, Locust Eating Preacher Drawing Attention". No way. I think not.

What was John "up to"?

John was calling people to repent, and what he said touched them so much and so deeply that not only did they regret their past sinfulness...why they were even baptized by him....symbolic of their identification with his movement.

John, the Baptizer, is not a carnival "sideshow", but is solidly within the tradition of the prophets, and his story is essential to the story of Jesus that follows. In fact, Mark's Gospel begins with the words,

"The beginning of the Good News of Jesus  
Christ....the Son of God."

And in a sense, yes...that "Good News" begins not with Jesus, but with John. I think we can say and be comfortable with this judgement that he really was "the one who got the whole thing started."

#### HOME AND PARENTS

To understand that John was not a "wide-eyed" desert crazy, we need to go back and look at his home and his parents. And as we read the story of his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, we become aware of how God's hand was on John...even before he was born.

Remember how Zechariah and Elizabeth were an elderly couple who had been unable to have children. Zechariah was a priest who regularly took his turn serving in the great temple up there in Jerusalem. On one fateful day the lot fell on Zechariah to enter the sanctuary of God...the "holy of Holies"...to offer a sacrifice on behalf of all the people. This generally was a privilege which would fall on a regular priest but once in his lifetime. While in this sacred place something extraordinary happened. Apparently, not only did Zechariah pray for the people, but he also prayed that his wife would have a child. Then the angel Gabriel appears to him and announces that his prayers have been heard....that Elizabeth shall bear a son and Zechariah shall name him....JOHN!

There's something here that touches me....it's a wonderfully "human" story. Here's Zechariah, in the big moment of his life, there in the great Temple, and praying for all of Israel, but slipping in a tiny prayer for a child. I like it. And it is this latter prayer which is heard. It reminds me that God listens not for the silvery tongues, but for the whisper of sincerity in our prayers. I've heard people occasionally say, "But, really.....I don't know how to pray" to which I am always tempted to say, "Good...then GO AHEAD and PRAY!"

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(There may be more than one woman present here this morning who likes the idea of a husband keeping quiet during the weeks and months of his wife's pregnancy).

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#### JOHN'S ADULT YEARS

Let's move on to John's adult years. Yes...he did dress oddly and eat with some peculiar ways and tastes, but those who heard him saw him fulfilling the role of the prophet. And when one is a prophet, one doesn't have time to check out the "Two Day Sale" at the local department store, nor spend time looking over the gourmet section of the local super-market.

John was an authentic voice of God. The Scriptures are quite clear that people from Judea and Jerusalem and the surrounding areas came out to hear him, and yes...even Herod. He spoke....he thundered with the authority of the prophet, with the authority of the need to repent and people...amazingly.... people responded! Did John use the element of fear in his speech and in his message? Of course, he did.....and "yes....fear isn't always bad". Fear, or the understanding of the consequences, can be useful and productive and healthy. For instance, I need a little fear when I drive on the Interstate. I need a little fear when I cook in the kitchen. I need a little fear when I step into the pulpit here and represent the highest and the best that humankind has ever known. Fear reminds me to take seriously what I am doing....whether it be driving a car, boiling potatoes, or preaching a sermon from this pulpit.

One asks: has the fear of God still a place in our Christian faith? Yes, of course it has, so long as we understand fear to be a healthy knowledge of consequences, and understand that fear is not our final destination. When I drive a car, or boil my potatoes, or preach a sermon....I need to know my responsibilities, but fear cannot be my dominant emotion. Fear stifles love.... it stifles the love of life. It is possible to love driving, cooking and preaching, and it is possible - 100% possible - to love God.

Listen carefully to how John Calvin wrote of how a fear of God should yield to a love of God. In his Institutes of the Christian Religion, Calvin wrote,

"All.....who have at any time....groped about in ignorance of God...will admit that the bridle of the law restrained them in some fear and reverence towards God until, REGENERATED by the Spirit, they began wholeheartedly to love Him."

#### TRAILBLAZER

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that there's ONE following me whose sandals I am not even fit to untie. In Biblical times that was the work of the slave and here's John, this incredibly popular prophet saying...."I'm not even worthy of that!" John's fiery words about repentance were important, but they did not represent the last word. It's a pitiful fact that too many people have been "force-fed" the wrath of God while they were kids and have been so turned off that now they have walled themselves from the love of God. It's true. How often I've heard that. But John Calvin was right. He hit the nail on the head when he suggested that fearing God must yield to loving God. Who was it who said that fear drives while love draws.

John spoke of the need to repent. In the original Greek, the word repentance is "metanoia" which is not just changing one's mind, nor one's decision, nor one's direction, but is turning toward God. All of us need that repentance, for if we take seriously this matter of being a Christian, we cannot be content with lip service to our faith. Much more is needed. As Soren Kierkegaard has written with wit and insight,

"A little water on your head when you are born, a little rice on your head when you get married and a little dirt on your head when you die do not make you a Christian."

John the Baptizer is a most fitting symbol for Advent as we go about our preparations for Christmas. He teaches us to take our faith seriously. Certainly amidst the glitter of this coming season, the hope of change can emerge. The blessing of Christmas, as I see it, is to realize that in Jesus, God has already given us the "bridge" to our true humanity. It is not hard to repent. It is not hard to receive forgiveness, harder perhaps to ask for it...but first we must see our separation from God.

C. S. Lewis who many of you have read, wrote of this in Mere Christianity.

"Christianity tells people to repent and promises them forgiveness. It therefore has nothing to say to people who do not know that they need any forgiveness. It is after you have realized that there is a Moral Law, and a Power behind the Law, and that you have broken the Law and put yourself wrong with that Power....it is after this and not a moment sooner that Christianity begins to talk."

CLOSING Mark's Gospel begins by telling us that the story of Jesus is good news, that the good news begins with John the Baptizer, and that John began by preaching repentance. What you and I need to see is that "repentance" is "Good News"....for forgiveness can be received.

And so it was that the NBC announcer watched a drab float come down Broadway in the Macy's Day Parade and proclaimed,

"Here come the ones who got the whole thing started..."

John should be there on that float. And let's pray that we don't miss the real parade of God's forgiveness and love. He may not be "everyone's cup of tea", but he should be...and needs to be. That man in the camel hair coat.

There's a village out in Michigan, I understand, located on the Lake Superior shoreline by the name of Christmas. As one drives down M-28 and nears this little village of Christmas, Michigan, there's a sign that says:

"CHRISTMAS.....GO SLOW"

The sign is good counsel. Go slow this Christmas. Savor the Good News of repentance and forgiveness. Wear your camel hair coat with the joy of Emmanuel and remember him who was garbed in camel hair and ate locusts and called people to repentance. He's there...on the float with those who got the whole thing started. You may not see him, but he's there....very much a part of this whole scene.

PRAYER

We ask, O God, for ourselves...the most meaningful Advent Season we have ever had. Drive us to our knees, to the Book...the Bible, to an awareness of our sin and our separation from You, to a careful searching of our virtues, to a serious examination of our words spoken to others and deeds performed, and to terms and carols so glibly sung or spoken.

And grant that when Christmas morning breaks for us this year that we may have something more to show for our much running about than tired feet and grumpy spirits, empty pocketbooks and regrets for gifts not given and cards not sent.

In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: November 30, 1997

LORD, that we are alive,  
that the ground is firm beneath our feet,  
that rest can compensate for toil,  
that food is plentiful and delicious to our taste,  
that earth might be fair and all her sons be blest,

THY NAME BE PRAISED!

LORD, we thank You for dear friends who really care,  
for ways that open when doors seem shut,  
for the reality of forgiveness - human and divine,  
for major purposes that make life's minor  
irritations bearable,  
for the assurance that more things are wrought by  
prayer than this world dreams.

WE THANK YOU FOR YOURSELF

The ground and source of every good, and especially for  
Your love that no resistance can diminish, and  
no need exhaust.

With all your people in every corner of creation, we count  
it joy to praise YOUR name, and  
to give YOU thanks for the many blessings of life.

WE PRAY this day for those who are finding life to be hard.

Make us sensitive to those who feel pain,  
who know stress and deep anguish,  
knowing that it is a matter of grace and not merit that  
we ourselves are not there.

WE PRAY for ourselves, ashamed that we have done so little with so much,  
yet struggling to offer YOU a more obedient service.

Give us keener self-understanding - as keen as we can bear  
at one sitting, lest we think of ourselves more highly,  
or lowly than we ought to think.

Give us a sense of what is truly important in life, lest we  
squander our time and waste our energies and money on  
the tinsel of life.

Give us a due regard for our unity with all people, lest we  
think in small patterns and exclusive ways and forget  
that You are the Lord of all the earth, Lord of all  
the people.

( over )



WE ASK FOR OURSELVES the most meaningful ADVENT SEASON we have ever had.

Drive us to our knees,  
to the Book,  
to an awareness of our sin,  
to a careful searching of our virtues,  
to a serious examination of words and terms so  
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AND GRANT that when Christmas morning breaks for us this year,

We may have something more to show for our much  
running about than tired feet, wrapped presents,  
grumpy spirits, empty pocketbooks and regrets for  
cards not sent and gifts not given.

All this we ask in the name and spirit of Jesus  
Christ, born in the manger of Bethlehem.

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I wish to thank Walter Gerbereux for today's title, "The Man In the Camel Hair Coat". He probably remembers the book and the movie of the nineteen forties starring Gregory Peck, "The Man In the Gray Flannel Suit".

George Leopold also had a title suggestion which I almost went with...."Not Everyone's Cup of Tea" suggested George at last Sunday's coffee hour, but there was something about the juxta-position of title and my name (on the same line) that worked against it, at least in my mind...

I started out ten days ago with a title that was far too long, "The Camel Hair, Locust Eating Preacher"....yes, too long. It wouldn't fit on the bulletin line.

'Course...some will say, why not just go with "John", or with "John, the Baptist", or with "The Preacher in the Wilderness". I used that one 25 years ago and again, something about the juxta-positioning of my name and title made me just a bit uncomfortable. But...

LET US PRAY.....

## "THE MAN IN THE CAMEL HAIR COAT"

### INTRODUCTION

Go back to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade of a year ago. It was moving along nicely toward a fevered climax. NBC had shown marching bands and recording artists "lip synching" their latest recording in the middle of Broadway. Those massive balloons of "Bullwinkle" and "Underdog" and the frenzied pitch of the announcer's voice made it obvious that Santa and his Reindeer were just a block away. Just about then a small float came wheeling down Broadway with the Wise Men, the Shepherds, Mary, Joseph and the Baby Jesus. It was then that the announcer, Willard (what's his name) shouted...

"And here come the Ones who got the whole thing started!"

And that's about all that there was to be said! "Here come the ONES who got the whole thing started!" Don't you love it? But how can Mary, Joseph and a baby compete with Kenny Rogers and Rudolph and Bullwinkle? The Holy Family occupies but a small float in the "passing parade", and yet....more and more people are returning each year to the Church and to the historic faith...because we are finding out that we need to know more about the straw in the stable than we do about the tinsel on the tree. We need Emmanuel. We need to know, "What child is THIS who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?" Emmanuel. God with us!

### DEVELOPMENT

It's slightly inappropriate to say, "Here come the ONES who got the whole thing started!" about the Holy Family, but that is an acceptable statement to make regarding John, the Baptizer and his relationship to Jesus. For when John appeared in the wilderness,

"Preaching a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins",

he truly was the one who got the whole thing started for Jesus. So, let's think about John here this morning for a few minutes. It is John who broods over this First Sunday of Advent.

When we stop to consider John the Baptizer, we can't help but notice his rather distinctive apparel and diet. He wore "a garment of camel's hair...and his food was locusts and wild honey". If you and I were to go down to Brooks Brothers, we could buy a beautiful camel's hair sport coat or top coat. They're in style. At least, it's called camel hair, but it wouldn't bear much resemblance to the coat that John was sporting...back there by the Jordan River...

We've seen camels in the zoo or perhaps ridden one on a trip to Egypt. Now believe me, John's not wearing a sport coat. His garment is tangled, matted and rugged. Can you imagine the impact that John made by wearing that coat and eating locusts? I don't think we'd invite him to stop by for a cup of coffee or if he came in and sat next to us in the restaurant, we'd probably feel uncomfortable. To our ears he sounds just a bit weird, but the Scriptures tell us that all of Judea and the area around Jerusalem went out to hear him...even Herod, the King. He didn't need to go to them. They came to him. Why? Was he a curiosity? A freak? Something for the press to gobble up? A first century "Macarena" - popular for a season, but then soon forgotten? Would he end up on the back pages of People magazine under the banner, "Camel Hair, Locust Eating Preacher Drawing Attention". No way. I think not.

What was John "up to"?

(There may be more than one woman present here this morning who likes the idea of a husband keeping quiet during the weeks and months of his wife's pregnancy).

The climax of the story comes eight days after the birth of the child, when he is to be circumcised and named. Since poor Zechariah cannot speak, the family members suggest that the child be named Zechariah, after his dad. How 'bout that? John, the Baptist, was almost named Zeke, Jr! But Zechariah quickly motions for a writing table and writes down, "His name is John". And immediately, Zechariah can speak...and speak he does! Why...one of the finest speeches in the entire New Testament follows. It's Zechariah's song of praise and we really shouldn't be too surprised that it was a "good one" for Zechariah was a preacher....a preacher who had been unable to speak for nine months, that's 39 weeks of stored up sermons. He had plenty of time to work on that perfect sermon. And deliver it, he does!

#### JOHN'S ADULT YEARS

Let's move on to John's adult years. Yes...he did dress oddly and eat with some peculiar ways and tastes, but those who heard him saw him fulfilling the role of the prophet. And when one is a prophet, one doesn't have time to check out the "Two Day Sale" at the local department store, nor spend time looking over the gourmet section of the local super-market.

John was an authentic voice of God. The Scriptures are quite clear that people from Judea and Jerusalem and the surrounding areas came out to hear him, and yes...even Herod. He spoke....he thundered with the authority of the prophet, with the authority of the need to repent and people...amazingly.... people responded! Did John use the element of fear in his speech and in his message? Of course, he did.....and "yes....fear isn't always bad". Fear, or the understanding of the consequences, can be useful and productive and healthy. For instance, I need a little fear when I drive on the Interstate. I need a little fear when I cook in the kitchen. I need a little fear when I step into the pulpit here and represent the highest and the best that humankind has ever known. Fear reminds me to take seriously what I am doing....whether it be driving a car, boiling potatoes, or preaching a sermon from this pulpit.

One asks: has the fear of God still a place in our Christian faith? Yes, of course it has, so long as we understand fear to be a healthy knowledge of consequences, and understand that fear is not our final destination. When I drive a car, or boil my potatoes, or preach a sermon....I need to know my responsibilities, but fear cannot be my dominant emotion. Fear stifles love.... it stifles the love of life. It is possible to love driving, cooking and preaching, and it is possible - 100% possible - to love God.

Listen carefully to how John Calvin wrote of how a fear of God should yield to a love of God. In his Institutes of the Christian Religion, Calvin wrote,

"All.....who have at any time....groped about in ignorance of God...will admit that the bridle of the law restrained them in some fear and reverence towards God until, REGENERATED by the Spirit, they began wholeheartedly to love Him."

#### TRAILBLAZER

John was the trailblazer for Jesus. Like a highway grader, he made the hills smooth and the rough places plain, but his fiery oratory was not the last word and John was the first to admit it. He said

that there's ONE following me whose sandals I am not even fit to untie. In Biblical times that was the work of the slave and here's John, this incredibly popular prophet-saying... "I'm not even worthy of that!" John's fiery words about repentance were important, but they did not represent the last word. It's a pitiful fact that too many people have been "force-fed" the wrath of God while they were kids and have been so turned off that now they have walled themselves from the love of God. It's true. How often I've heard that. But John Calvin was right. He hit the nail on the head when he suggested that fearing God must yield to loving God. Who was it who said that fear drives while love draws.

John spoke of the need to repent. In the original Greek, the word repentance is "metanoia" which is not just changing one's mind, nor one's decision, nor one's direction, but is turning toward God. All of us need that repentance, for if we take seriously this matter of being a Christian, we cannot be content with lip service to our faith. Much more is needed. As Soren Kierkegaard has written with wit and insight,

"A little water on your head when you are born, a little rice on your head when you get married and a little dirt on your head when you die do not make you a Christian."

John the Baptizer is a most fitting symbol for Advent as we go about our preparations for Christmas. He teaches us to take our faith seriously. Certainly amidst the glitter of this coming season, the hope of change can emerge. The blessing of Christmas, as I see it, is to realize that in Jesus, God has already given us the "bridge" to our true humanity. It is not hard to repent. It is not hard to receive forgiveness, harder perhaps to ask for it...but first we must see our separation from God.

C. S. Lewis who many of you have read, wrote of this in Mere Christianity.

"Christianity tells people to repent and promises them forgiveness. It therefore has nothing to say to people who do not know that they need any forgiveness. It is after you have realized that there is a Moral Law, and a Power behind the Law, and that you have broken the Law and put yourself wrong with that Power....it is after this and not a moment sooner that Christianity begins to talk."

CLOSING

Mark's Gospel begins by telling us that the story of Jesus is good news, that the good news begins with John the Baptizer, and that John began by preaching repentance. What you and I need to see is that "repentance" is "Good News"....for forgiveness can be received.

And so it was that the NBC announcer watched a drab float come down Broadway in the Macy's Day Parade and proclaimed,

"Here come the ones who got the whole thing started..."

John should be there on that float. And let's pray that we don't miss the real parade of God's forgiveness and love. He may not be "everyone's cup of tea", but he should be...and needs to be. That man in the camel hair coat.

There's a village out in Michigan, I understand, located on the Lake Superior shoreline by the name of Christmas. As one drives down M-28 and nears this little village of Christmas, Michigan, there's a sign that says:

"CHRISTMAS.....GO SLOW"

The sign is good counsel. Go slow this Christmas. Savor the Good News of repentance and forgiveness. Wear your camel hair coat with the joy of Emmanuel and remember him who was garbed in camel hair and ate locusts and called people to repentance. He's there...on the float with those who got the whole thing started. You may not see him, but he's there....very much a part of this whole scene.

PRAYER

We ask, O God, for ourselves...the most meaningful Advent Season we have ever had. Drive us to our knees, to the Book...the Bible, to an awareness of our sin and our separation from You, to a careful searching of our virtues, to a serious examination of our words spoken to others and deeds performed, and to terms and carols so glibly sung or spoken.

And grant that when Christmas morning breaks for us this year that we may have something more to show for our much running about than tired feet and grumpy spirits, empty pocketbooks and regrets for gifts not given and cards not sent.

In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.