

Sunday, January 9, 2011: Matthew 3:13-17

by [David Dragseth](#) in the [December 28, 2010](#) issue

My college motto is *vox clamantis in deserto*, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. It suits a college whose fame includes being the setting for the movie *Animal House*. Cry out in playful poetry. Cry out in inebriated bombast. Cry out amid the lone pines of New Hampshire. I love my alma mater for its love of crying out, but I love God more for reminding me that the *vox clamantis* was John the Baptist, and that John the Baptist cried not just to make a fuss, but so that all of us might return to who it is we truly are. At the baptism of our Lord, Jesus chose this man, this master at crying out.

In late October I met John the Baptist face-to-face—not on the muddy trickle of the Jordan, but on the black waters of the Upper Connecticut River. He was short and feisty, and the eight of us who gathered in middle age at a reunion of our collegiate varsity crew called him our coxswain.

Mark is a corporate consultant and a member of an upstanding congregational church in Wellesley, Massachusetts, but for our first rowing practice, he pulled out the camel's hair and wild honey. Turning up the microphone in the boat, he cried across the White and Green Mountains:

"All right, you [bleep]ers. You've been changing diapers and managing spreadsheets and clicking your e-mail and adjusting the lumbar on your office chairs too long. [Bleep] that. We're going to row, and we're going to win. Your 40-year-old bodies are going to suffer something horrible today, and I don't want to hear about it. Turn off all that [bleep] that you've become. I know it's been 18 years, but remember who you are. Shut up and row!"

After years of sedate pastoral training and ecclesial meetings that purged all but the most passive-aggressive of insults from my soul, my ears were shocked to life. For freedom Christ has set me free. Yea, *vox clamantis*. Let it rip. Get the winnowing fork out. Grab the ax. I am not a mainline, frumpy pastor. I am called in righteousness. Let the oppressed go free.

If the church wants a kick in the proverbial behind, perhaps it should slot a bunch of coxswains for its festivals of homiletics.

What shocked us was Mark's intensity. What compelled us was Mark's rage. Mark cared beyond all caring for a stupid boat race. He enlisted everything in his rhetorical arsenal to clear the decks for it. He believed with fire and spirit, and in that moment I did too. We all did. Repenting of our former selves, we sat silent and awaited the order: Ready all. Row.

And we rowed with power and grace. It was beautiful.

As a middle-aged father of three and cleaner of minivans, I am startled to feel such power. It awakens a long-buried knowledge. Bodies are marvelous things. They carry around our identities even when our thinking selves forget. Athletes or musicians or those of us who ride bikes will call this muscle "memory." But it is spiritual memory too, incarnate. Our bodies remember the spiritual truth that they were created in God's image, and when a forceful voice unveils the truth, they awaken with an intensity and purpose that simply must be glorified. He will baptize you with Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand. This is my son, the beloved; in him I am well pleased.

Jesus needed a righteous cleansing, and we in the contemporary church need it too.

Most of us church leaders do not handle the passion of John the Baptist well. We get nervous when someone challenges us too boldly. We start fidgeting in our seats. Uncomfortable, we settle for a less startling approach to baptism and make baptism peaceful and affirmative. But while such niceties feel good at the outset, over time the powerful voice crying out in the wilderness is degraded to a feeble voice whining in the wasteland. Whiners don't proclaim—they drone.

John's baptismal sermon is not calm and tame—because the world in which we baptize is not calm and tame. There is a great deal at stake in our world, and when a preacher calls her congregation a "brood of vipers," sometimes that is exactly what they need to hear. When a preacher tells a longstanding member that his lineage and history of giving doesn't mean much to God Almighty, the words may open the heavens. When a preacher decries the obscene amount of money we still spend on warfare, she may clear the air so that our world may see the Son of God ushering in peaceful redemption.

It's hard for John the Baptist types to draw steady salaries in church life, but the Son of God reminds us that we need these people with their microphones turned up, their uncomfortable expletives and their pointed challenges.