

2 Advent Matthew 3:1-12
Christ and Grace December 8, 2019
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It's that time of year when we are planning for Christmas while at the same time trying to observe Advent. We are thinking about nativity scenes and snow and lovely bright lights. We come to church to immerse ourselves in the beauty of this holy season and what do we get? John the Baptist! Clearly he is an important figure, as all four Gospel writers include him. John the Baptist shows up in Advent, Epiphany, and Lent. Perhaps this is to remind us that we need to repent in every season; we need to repent over and over. John just keeps showing up, interrupting our expectations, and we are left to make the best of him, like some eccentric relative at every family gathering!

John is abrasive, shocking, and almost comical. How are we supposed to take him seriously, dressed in scratchy camel hair to make a fashion statement, and crunching on locusts dripping with sticky honey? Calling people a brood of vipers is not going to win friends and influence people! But perhaps it's his total non-conformity that grabs our attention and keeps us awake.

In the Gospel according to Matthew the first word out of the Baptizer's mouth is "repent". John was all about repentance but most of us do not find that to be a very comfortable topic. John's mission seemed to be exactly that, though – to make everyone uncomfortable with the status quo and to tell them what it means to repent – to turn in a new direction – to change. I don't think it's a coincidence that John the Baptist does his best work in the wilderness. Because don't we all know that change can feel a lot like being in the wilderness?

The people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to John, being baptized, and confessing their sins. We do that too, right? We are fine upstanding churchgoers, baptized long ago, and we say the confession every Sunday, right? But John saw the fine, upstanding templegoers of his day and he called them a brood of vipers. Then, when he had their attention, he told them to "bear fruit worthy of repentance."

And something else he told them was to stop presuming - to stop presuming things about the people who do not look like them, who do not do things the way they have always done them, who do not eat the same foods, wear the same clothes, or live life the way they do. In short, John was saying, "do not presume that those people who are different, who are not card carrying descendants of Abraham, are not beloved children of God as you are." Presuming almost always gets us into trouble, and can even be the root of much of our sin.

So John tells us we must repent, and his idea of repentance has more to do with turning "toward" something rather than just turning "from" sin. Repentance, after all, isn't only about feeling bad or saying, "I'm sorry." It's also about a re-orientation, a change of perspective and direction, a commitment to turn and live differently. John wanted the people to turn around and go back into town, back to their community to live differently. He also wanted them to turn from a presumptuous way of being toward the One for whom he was preparing the way, the One who would bring them new life.

John knew they were all in need of repentance, and that is no different today for each one of us. We all stand in need of repentance, in need of conversion, not just once in our lives, but every day of our lives. We need to daily turn toward God and away from everything that keeps us from God, so that we can come closer to experiencing the depth of God's love for us, of God's amazing grace at work in our lives.

What might repentance look like for us? What blocks our way to God? Perhaps things like greed, selfishness, hostility, or resentment are making the straight paths to God crooked. Maybe it's judgment of others, refusal to forgive, or unwillingness to look for the new shoots of life from the stumps in our past. Any of that can separate us from God. To prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight is to be about the business of repentance, and it's a worthy Advent practice, indeed.

Our Annual Meeting is a time for us to gather and reflect on the past year, and look toward the coming year with hope. John the Baptist can help us with this. What has been challenging and what have been our blessings? What have we neglected and what has gone well? What has distracted us from our mission and what have been our greatest works for God's kingdom? As we see the story contained in our Annual Report, we can rejoice in the blessings and we can accept, with God's help, the challenges that are before us. The church can feel like a wilderness sometimes and often it's a microcosm of all that's happening in the world around us. But as we continue to be the church together we will hear a voice calling us to repent – to turn in a new direction – to change.

The voice in the wilderness can sound scary, speaking of winnowing forks and unquenchable fire. How can this be good news when it sounds like judgment? I wonder if we squirm with discomfort because we misconstrue the meaning of judgment, equating judgment with condemnation, when in fact, to judge something is to see it clearly — to know it as it truly is. Synonyms for judgment include discernment, acuity, sharpness, and perception.

What if John is saying that the Messiah who is coming really sees us? That he knows us at our very core? Maybe the winnowing fork is an instrument of deep love, patiently wielded by the One who discerns in us rich harvests still hidden by chaff. Maybe it's in offering God every particular of our lives that we give Him permission to "clear" us — to separate all that's destructive from all that is good, beautiful, and worthy.¹

John the Baptist helps us understand God's intention to transform us for good. Advent invites us to confess fully and without fear, knowing that God's merciful forgiveness is surely drawing nigh and will arrive in an infant, born in a manger, our Savior Christ the Lord. O Come, O come, Immanuel. Amen.

¹ Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2470