

Advent 2A (12/4/16)

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

John the Baptizer is not meek, pleasant, polite, or amiable. His message is urgent, so he refuses to play by the rules of respectability. But if he offends our sensibilities, he also undermines standard religious procedure, bypassing the established order of things to herald a new reality. God's inbreaking realm – embodied in the person and work of Jesus – makes a startling break with the past, not simply for the sake of change, but for the sake of new life. So, repentance is a fresh start, a renewed opportunity to take hold of the life that really is life.

Happy Advent, you brood of vipers!

I'd be surprised if John the Baptizer figured prominently in any of our minds around the holidays. He'd be a buzz kill on our shopping trips and an awkward addition to our office parties. He'd stick out like a sore thumb in our cozy living rooms decked with ornamented trees and twinkle lights. He'd certainly ruin the Sunday school Christmas program. And, he wouldn't care if he did. Yet, here is John, at the heart of the Advent season, crying out in the wilderness, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" He screams at us from the margin – from outside the realm of normalcy – with a message that seems more appropriate for the End of the World than for "the most wonderful time of the year."

What is the role of this untamed prophet, crudely dressed and eating the food of the destitute?¹ And what is the purpose of his strident call to repentance? He's got zero Christmas spirit, that's for sure. He's not meek, pleasant, polite, or amiable. He does not conform. No, **John's message is urgent, so he refuses to play by the**

¹ See William R. Herzog II, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1, 47.

rules of respectability. His voice pierces right through our expectations for proper religion.

But if John the Baptizer offends our sensibilities, he also undermines standard religious procedure, bypassing the established order of things to herald a new reality: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!” His baptism of repentance takes place well outside the centers of influence. Ritual cleansings prescribed by tradition and overseen by priestly authority in the temple suddenly seem small by comparison to John’s dramatic immersion in the free-flowing waters of the river Jordan.² It isn’t a Christian baptism, but it’s a compelling one nonetheless. Crowds from the city and countryside alike stream out to a wild place to hear John and be baptized, confessing their brokenness and yearning for a new beginning. It’s every preacher’s dream!

But John is not content to stop at that. “I baptize you with water for repentance,” he continues, “but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire!” *There is something more to this*, John insists, *everything is about to change*. And the change he foresees is jarring:

Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ...His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

This doesn’t sound much like “tidings of comfort and joy,” does it? **If John’s abrasive call to repentance captures our attention, it’s nothing by comparison to Jesus’ tree-felling, grain-threshing, refuse-burning baptism by fire.**

² Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 37.

Change hurts. John the Baptizer makes it clear that the advent of the kingdom of heaven on Earth is no jolly ride through the snow “on a one-horse open sleigh.” **Jesus’ arrival signals a new way of life markedly different from the decay of life as we know it. All that is useless to the realm of God – our pride, our self-centeredness, our indifference – is stripped away and destroyed, leaving only the possibility for abundant life as God intends it – a life of humility, of generosity, of sacrificial love. There is something critical at stake in the Messiah’s advent, and real, life-giving change requires a shock to the system.**

No one knows this better than the miser, Ebenezer Scrooge. My favorite retelling of Charles Dickens’ classic, *A Christmas Carol*, is the 1970 film, *Scrooge*. Embittered by a lifetime of greed and solitude, Scrooge growls at any expression of Christmas spirit and looks upon his neighbors – even his last remaining family – with contempt. Then, on Christmas Eve, he receives a fearful visit from the ghost of his late business partner, who brings to his attention the error of his ways and announces the arrival of three more spirits over the course of the night. Witnessing the truth of Christmases past and present, Scrooge is finally subjected to a hopeless vision of the future and his own tormented end. The arrival of Christmas morning is a welcome reprieve, and Scrooge, sufficiently troubled by his experience, grips his bedpost with gratitude and declares: “...I’m alive. I’m alive! I’ve got a chance to change, and I will not be the man I was! ...I’ll begin today, throw away the past. And the future I build will be something that will last.”

Repentance, it turns out, is not for the faint of heart. Martin Luther called it “an earnest attack on the old [self] and an entering into new life.”³ *An attack on the old self*. That sounds a lot like John’s unsettling call to change your life, a lot like Jesus’ axe lying at the root of your tree, a lot like a furnace for incinerating chaff. God’s inbreaking realm – embodied in the person and work of Jesus – makes a startling break with the past.⁴ But, it’s not change for the sake of change. The promise of baptism is that even as your old self is drowned in the baptismal water day after day – and what’s more troubling than that? – your new self, a new life united with Jesus’ own resurrection, emerges from the water, free to walk in the Way of the Lord.

Dear church, **change hurts, but it’s worth it**. So, how does John the Baptizer’s call to repentance strike you *this* Advent? What is the debris in *your* life that Jesus is working to separate and burn away? What is at stake for *you* in the advent of the kingdom? **Repentance is a fresh start, a return to the destructive and life-giving waters of your baptism. So, be immersed again today, come up from the water, and take hold of the life that really is life.**⁵

³ *The Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, 466.

⁴ John P. Burgess, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1, 48.

⁵ 1 Timothy 6:18-19.