

“For Crying Out Loud!”

Second Sunday of Advent, Mal. 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

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For John the Baptizer, there was no time like the present: “Prepare the way of the Lord!” was what the people heard John crying out loudly in the desert, the wilderness of the Dead Sea area. There was no “beating around the bush” with John. He had a message to give the people of Israel, and this messenger was on a mission from God. John’s message was simple: The kingdom of God was coming, and we better get ready for its presence among us.

What a wonderfully bizarre person to focus on in this season of Advent. Think about it: Amid the sometimes smothering “niceness” and sugary “pleasantries” of the Christmas season, afraid that someone will accuse us of being “Scrooge,” we Christians have someone in our storied lives that makes Dickens’ “Scrooge” seem almost normal. To play off of our culture’s romantic idea of Christmas we have the complete opposite character in the person of John the Baptist. Cultural observer and critic Marshall McLuhan once wrote the famous aphorism: the medium *is* the message. It meant that, when it comes to advertising in this world of ours, often the medium by which a message is delivered *is* the message itself.¹ The very characteristics of the messenger embodies the message that must be delivered. What McLuhan observed in this century was something that God has practiced throughout creation’s story. For in order to get the intended, and otherwise close-minded, hearers to be open to receiving the radical hope of the message being communicated by God, God needs messengers who will startle and grab our daydreaming attention. John the Baptizer fits the bill...and then some.

Who was this person we fondly refer to as John the Baptizer? From the description in the gospel accounts of Matthew and Mark, John did not dress in your normal toga and sandals of Sunday school depiction, like most “ordinary” ancient Israelites. Instead, John wore “clothing of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locust and wild honey.” Such clothes would not be welcomed at any garage sale in this world today, and given his eating habits, he would push the boundaries of the term “vegetarian” by our cultural lens of the twentieth century.²

He didn’t seem like the reserved kind of personality that we would be comfortable with in our congregations or parishes today. Quite frankly, having reflected upon the characteristics that are used to describe John, and with my background in psychology and special education, I dare say he would have been a prime candidate for therapy, some thorazine perhaps, and possible removal from the community at large. For example, along with the strange attire and diet, from all accounts, he constantly made all kinds of judgments about people, calling those around him a “brood of vipers.” And whenever he got a chance to tell people what was on his mind, he let go with a vengeance: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight....Do not begin to say to yourselves ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 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”

(Luke 3:7-9). To say the least, the messenger was disturbing a lot of people with that kind of message.

And that's the thing: John just was not a "normal, nice" person that we have grown accustomed to in our churches. He was the President, Vice President, Secretary/Treasurer of the "Blunt Tongue Club!" He would be considered "deviant" and "strange" by some. But then the message he was bearing in his mind, in his heart, what was bred in his very bones, was something so marvelously audacious, that no one else *but* a person like John the Baptist could effectively warn people about the most unusual, grand event that was about to come down earth's craggy road.

Why was John the Baptist so unusual? Because God had chosen John for the special task of being what many biblical scholars call the "last great prophet of Israel." John's personality fit to a tee the kind of person God chose to be prophets. For example, like the prophet Jeremiah, John was consecrated for the task before his birth. And like Jeremiah, John would announce God's judgment regarding the people of Israel. The person who was going to be the messenger of Christ's coming, to prepare the way before him, was going to be as scalding hot "as a refiner's fire," able to burn off the dross and purify silver and gold until it is ready to be offered to the Lord (Malachi 3:1-4). The person was going to be a most stringent cleanser, not Ivory soap, but one who truly scour people of evil. He will be sent to the people for a deep refining and special cleansing, thus fulfilling the prophecy of Malachi.

What was the message that this seemingly aberrant messenger was going to proclaim? John's charging personality and message was prologue for the greatest event of our lives: the birth of God's only begotten Son. John literally sets the stage we affectionately call "earth" for the coming of the Messiah. Only too aware of his mission from God, John was trying to get the people's attention as to the importance of the moment, in which earth's history would be changed forever. John was demanding a new way of living our lives, not for the sake of change itself, but so that we may be in the right position to hear, to see, to experience, to receive more fully the news of God's greatest gift of love, a gift for *all* the earth, for *all* of humanity, saints and sinners alike.

Using the metaphor of earthen landscape, John announces to all who were in hearing range that our spiritual geography was going to go through some magnificent changes: a great leveling. Deep valleys shall be filled and made flat; high mountains and rocky hills shall be made low; the crooked roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways will be made smooth. A great leveling must occur in our lives, in which there is nothing too high or too low, too crooked or too rough. Our lives should be as flat as the flatland in our American prairies. And once they are that flat, we will be ready to learn of the ways of God in the person of Jesus Christ. In her book, *Dakota*, poet Kathleen Norris quotes Benedictine monk Terrence Kardong, who wrote that the Great Plains of the Dakotas are a "school for humility. In this eccentric environment...certainly one is made aware that things are not entirely in our control. The Plains offer constant reminders that we are quite powerless over our circumstances."

And that is what God wants us to become: For us to be aware that we are not in control. *God* is the One in control. *We* are the ones who are created by God. In all truth and honesty, we are quite powerless, and this is a necessary stance for us to be able to accept this wondrous gift of love in the Christ child. We should be in position

so that we may be swept over by the welcome flood of water, like the water that covers the arid land of the prairies after a storm passes from one horizon to another, filling our soul with reverence and awe for the bounteous love of God.

And as John proclaimed this message by the word of his mouth, he practiced the gesture of baptizing people from all walks of life, even the outcasts of Jewish society, like soldiers, publicans and tax collectors. Why even these outsiders to the Jewish community? Because the Lord, whose message was deeply bred in the life of John, is the God of all humankind, for “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3:6).

Because John baptized, so we practice the sacramental gesture of baptism to this day in Christian churches, dying to what separates us from God, and rising in newness of life in Christ. In the Baptismal covenant of the United Methodist Church, the words are read that “in the fullness of time you sent Jesus, nurtured in the water of a womb. Jesus was baptized by John and anointed by your Spirit.”⁴ By the waters of baptism, our attention on things of *this* world are drawn back to the grace of God expressed in the gift of the Christ-child, who will die for us and be raised for us, fulfilling God’s purpose in God’s promised future.

Lest we keep John the Baptist as a character of our stories past, let us also be reminded in this season of Advent that there is something of John’s character that still resides in us today. In her book *Holy the Firm*, writer Annie Dillard writes of a Congregationalist minister, “This man knows God. Once, in the middle of the long pastoral prayer of intercession for the whole world — for the gift of wisdom to its leaders, for hope and mercy to the grieving and pains, succor to the oppressed, and God’s grace to all — in the middle of this he stopped, and burst out, ‘Lord, we bring you these same petitions every week.’ After a shocked pause, he continued reading the prayer. Because of this, I like him very much,” writes Dillard.⁵

It was that same spirit, God’s Spirit, that was in John the Baptist which also resided in the heart of this minister, who cried out to God for all to see and hear. It is that spirit, God’s spirit, that stirs within the lay leader who no longer can tolerate the way a church tries to be more like the world rather than being more like Christ, or the parishioner who can no longer take the injustice of an economic system that keeps people poor and homeless, opening wider the gap between the haves and have-nots. And just like John, each one of these people is stared at, is thought to be different, is considered to be on the edge of a nervous breakdown. And just like John, the Spirit of God is moving within us all as we continue to nurture the audacious hope of Advent. Let us all cry out loud, for God’s Spirit is still preparing our collective mind, body and spirit to tell others of great joy. For something that was begun by God has its fullness in and only through union with Christ, the light of the world.

NOTES

¹ Marshall McLuhan, “Understanding Media,” in Neil Postman, ed., *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 8.

² Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 69.

³ Kathleen Norris, *Dakota* (New York: Ticknor and Field, 1993), 9.

⁴ *United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 40.

⁵ Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1977), 58.