

"Capable of Receiving Christmas"
Matthew 3:1-12 2016

In Norfolk, at the light where Shore Drive crosses Little Creek, and right across from Gate #1 at the Navy's Amphibious base, members of one of the more fundamentalist churches stand out on the median strip on Fri. and Sat. evenings, where they wave their KJV Bibles and scream frantically: "Are you saved - or you going to burn in hell forever?, and have you been washed in the blood of Jesus?" That image of fiery and strident street-preaching comes to mind when I read John the Baptist threats of God's harsh judgement and warning-call for repentance in the Matthew 3 passage.

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ... every tree that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ... he gathers the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. Repent for the Kingdom of heaven has come near."

John's message sounds so angry and seems almost out of place for when we are making Advent preparations for baby Jesus. So why do you suppose we read about John and his revival preaching every year in December, on the second Sunday of Advent? It's because there are several things theologically significant about John the Baptist, that really can help us prepare to receive the coming of Jesus Christ at Christmas. Listen again to how John is being described by

Matthew 3:1-4

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

More than just introducing John into the story about Jesus, these verses are intended to connect John and his ministry, to particular images and stories of the Old Testament that prepare the reader for the rest of the Jesus story. First, John appears in the wilderness, and the word 'wilderness' reveals an important insight & truth about John, his message & purpose. We know that throughout the history of the ancient Jewish people, the wilderness was the place where God ministers to his people, where they are prepared to receive God's blessings, and the stage is set for God to fulfill his promises. It was in the wilderness that God made the promise to Abraham, to bless him, his offspring, and all of creation through him. In the wilderness God came and spoke to the prophet Elijah, not in the powerful earthquake, the storm or fire, but in the still quiet voice of encouragement and hope. In the wilderness God provided water and manna to the Israelites, and led them, teaching them to trust and depend upon God alone thereby preparing them to move into the Promised Land. For the whole forty years of trekking through the wilderness, God protected, provided for and transformed those slaves by blessing them into becoming the nation of Israel. Wilderness is the place where God tests and transforms his people.

All through Scripture significant events occur in the wilderness. For there, in the wilderness, away from cultural distractions, there, the people hear & experience God's guiding presence as they learn to live & to walk in faithfulness & obedience. Also, John's clothing, camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, that description is the same as what the prophet Elijah wore, suggesting that their two ministries are connected somehow. Elijah was the prophet who opposed King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and who called and urged the people of Israel to repent --- to turn back from their worship of the false gods of Baal. Like Elijah, John appeared in the wilderness preaching for repentance.

Regrettably, the word repentance is often grossly misunderstood. Its focus is not on guilt, sorrow or even regret over our past sins, but more importantly, it is turning toward God, a positive realignment of life toward faith and good our response to God's grace, promise and presence. Repent means more than, "I am sorry, so I'll try harder and do better" but rather, "I'm sorry, and I cannot do it on my own, for only your grace and power can make me righteous." That sort of repentance is the work and the task of doing Advent. Advent is making spiritual preparation for receiving God's blessings and for us to become capable of receiving God's promise of renewal. More than being sorry, real repentance is about a desire for God to work in our lives. We repent knowing that God loves us, wants to bless us, not punish us. Repentance describes our response to God's transforming grace that makes us capable of receiving God's love and blessings. Out

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there, in that barren desert wilderness, in John the Baptist, the people recognize God's truth and power that was lacking in their comfortably complacent religion, so they came to this unusual man - God's prophet messenger. There, the people repented and they were baptized.

Theologically, John's baptism of repentance was a sign of recognition that in compromising with the world, they had turned against God. Their submission to baptism marked their humble repentance and their desire to live in a new and more righteous way, i.e. to live in a way consistent with having a relationship with God. It was that issue that stood between John and the religious leaders when they come out to investigate John and his wilderness ministry. John the Baptist was not flattered or impressed by their presence, but in fact, he sees right through their haughty hypocrisy, and goes after them with unrestrained harshness of brutal truth-telling, accusation and fervor. And what a rude, shocking & unpleasant experience that must have been, a foretaste of the conflicts Jesus would also have with them. But the sad truth is, so too most of us are complacent at times, or even lazy and comfortable in our faith-walk with the Lord. Despite being raised and growing up in a good Christian home, as I look back along my own journey of faith, there have been too many times when I allowed the clutter and glitter of our world and culture to crowd out and distract my attention away from an authentic and growing relationship with Jesus Christ... at least until someone or something had grabbed my attention, and forced me to notice and recognize the disparity between the life I was living and the faith I claimed to believe.

That's how John help us prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. Crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Repentance is a call for us to examine our lives and our living: our values, our priorities, our behavior, the words we speak, our relationships, our integrity, our walk with God, our commitments, and our use of time and resources ... and if we're are not headed toward God & becoming more Christ-like, then repent, turn around, and don't keep going further away from where we want to end up. Repentance is not a matter of sitting around feeling guilty or ashamed. Repentance is turning to receive the blessings God intends for us... and it is living out an appropriate and faithful response to God's wonderful gift of grace, compassion and love.

During this season of Advent the point is to consider what we are doing with our lives?, and if our relationship with God through Christ is really all that it should be and needs to be. Is my faith really the same faith as the Christian martyrs, who gave their all, even their lives for Christ? ... and am I really even playing on the same ball field? Is my faith real or just a comfortable façade? Sometimes we need a John the Baptist railing against our hypocrisy, someone to challenge & point out our partial & easy commitments someone to reflect the bright light of grace into our darkness something to prepare us to listen, to hear and respond to God's call... to confront us, to push us when we get sloppy or lazy in our faith. Advent presents us with a critical choice, whether we will align ourselves with what God is doing in our world, or whether we will simply go along with the way things are.

Advent is about moving us toward being and becoming more capable of receiving God's grace, promises and blessings. So as we approach the Lord's Table this Advent Sunday, let us attend to the voice crying out in our wilderness; Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.