

Advent 2 2019

John the Baptist is a pretty unlikely cheerleader. First, on a superficial level, his appearance needs a bit of work. Matthew's gospel describes him as a true wild-man, with camel's hair clothing. We might imagine he looks like a Survivor contestant, wind-blown and disheveled after time in the wilderness. Second, John the Baptist is a little quirky. He eats locusts and wild honey. We might imagine that his general demeanor and mannerisms follow this same trend, and that, at best, this prophetic voice calling out gets more than a few sideways glances.

And yet, this is the one sent to proclaim the prophetic message and prepare a way for the Lord. John the Baptist is the leader of the rally for the amazing changes God is about to make in the world. Matthew's gospel sets the stage with a beautiful telling of Jesus' birth, and then it is as if there is a drumroll, all eyes on that paper banner held at the entrance to the room and through it bursts . . . John the Baptist, with a disturbing message. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" (v.1) and for the benefit of the Pharisees, "Happy Advent! You brood of vipers!"

This isn't quite the feel-good message we might expect. But such a jarring image might be just what we need to truly understand Advent. It is a time of getting ready, and certainly a lot of that is aided by encouragement and renewed energy for the Christmas message. It is also a time of examination of ourselves, our hearts, to make our souls just as ready as our neatly decorated homes. And so, in our Advent rally, John the Baptist calls us to "keep our head in the game" and reminds us of what is at stake during this season is our very salvation.

For John, the coming of the Lord is more than just a call to celebrate the Messiah. It is a call to shift our lives in a way that allows us to live in the new kingdom of God that is coming. John preaches a message of Repentance. It is a call of change. The word literally means to turn around. It's as if John is trying to call the people of God's attention to the rising sun on the horizon, but everyone is facing west. Even though the prophets and others have continuously told them to look east, God's people are stubborn and have become fixated in the other direction. Gentle taps on the shoulder and nudging have not changed their perspective, so here comes John, barging in to literally help turn the people of God around so that they can see the light of the new coming day.

He may have been a bit of a wild man, but his message caught on. We read that he had numerous followers, who not only showed up to see some spectacle but took his message to heart, confessing their sins and receiving the waters of baptism in the Jordan River. With such an outlandish message, we might wonder why he became so popular. After all, “come to Jesus” type messages aren’t usually received so well. But perhaps it was just the right time for the people of God. Maybe he spoke around the start of a new year, when people were looking for a resolution to make that would change their lives. Perhaps they were simply weary of the way the world was going and welcomed the call for change. Maybe they were grateful for a voice that was bluntly honest in a way that truly resonated with them. I think the people of God, much like us today, were longing for a new direction and in that longing, they were able to hear John’s message as one not of dismissive condemnation, but of love.

For some, this is a peculiar text for us to read on the second Sunday of Advent, a week when we express and give thanks for the love God has shown to us. But its placement is fitting, and reminds us that God’s love is not a platitude, but is a deep, abiding love that extends to us even when we are at our worst, and facing in the wrong direction entirely. So often we hear cries of “repent” as a message of judgment that should bring about guilty feelings. But John’s message is not about a guilt-induced change of heart.

The Pharisees and Sadducees also came to hear John the Baptist, and were coming to be baptized. John responds by calling them a “brood of vipers,” indicating that there is something up with their approach that is not entirely in line with the well-known instructions for faithful living. One commentary notes that they may have been genuine in their intents, but something was still awry:

Perhaps they wanted a bit of his message, but not too much – enough to clear the conscience and remove the guilt, enough so that they need no longer to [be] haunted by the past, enough to feel good again.

But not enough to really change them much. In many ways, this is where most of us want to spend our Advent season. We want to get a little taste of the good news of Christmas, say “aww” at the sweet little baby in a manger, and then go on our way with a little extra spring in our step. We don’t really want to tackle hard theological points, just the heart-warming ones.

John proclaims that the kingdom of God is near. It’s coming. Before we have time to get everything hidden again. The doorbell is ringing. The Savior has come . . . are we ready to open the door? This is the question of Advent. John

the Baptist calls us to fling open those junk drawers and crammed closets in our lives and sort through our stuff so that we can truly be ready and have a clear path for the one who is to come. And then, he goes and opens all that we have tried to keep hidden. Are we willing to let Jesus into the crazy, mixed up lives we have made for ourselves?

The good news is this – Christ can handle our messiness. In fact, that’s a lot of his reason for coming into the world. Jesus is one of those friends who doesn’t care if you’ve vacuumed or dusted when he comes over. In fact, he’s the one who walks in and picks up the broom to start sweeping. He isn’t interested in going through your dirty laundry; he’s in the business of fluff and fold and will help you get even the most stubborn stains out. That, friends, is the result of God’s love for us; a God who doesn’t overlook, but overcomes all our messes.

So perhaps our question should be less of are we ready to repent this Advent, and more are we ready to accept the incredible love God has for us? We live in a world where precious few things come without strings attached, and the mantra of “if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.” We’d rather be skeptical or hedge our bets on a variety of options rather than fully buy into such absurd promises or hopes, lest we end up hurt and disappointed.

But remember, Advent is our rallying call. No matter what we’re up against, it’s a time for us to cheer loudly and get excited, believing that anything is possible as we look toward the night when we celebrate that God can and will make a way, even leading right to our hearts.

Amen.