

The Holy Intruder

Isaiah 11:1-10

Luke 3:1-18

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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We all have at least one relative who makes family get-togethers a grueling experience. The offender might be a gossipy aunt, a boastful brother-in-law, an arrogant, know it all nephew or a judgmental cousin. Since this unfortunate person is family, he or she must be endured. The one saving grace: you only have to put up with this person once or twice a year and if you're lucky, you're seated at the far end of the table.

On the second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist pays his annual visit to make us feel unseasonably uncomfortable. He seems an odd intrusion into our Christmas preparations. There's no hint of Merry Christmas in his voice, only dire warnings that we clean up our act...or else!

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you God is able from the stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the foot of the trees; every tree without fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Luke 3:7-90)

Merry Christmas to you too John!

The religious elites were threatened by John's scathing attacks because as far as they were concerned, John was a meddlesome troublemaker. “How dare he talk to me like that?” at least one priest or Pharisee muttered under his breath. “Just who does he think he is?”

Oddly enough, the common people welcomed John's tough talk because somebody was finally opening the heavens and speaking with the voice of God, something they hadn't heard for a long time.

The working poor felt used by their religious leaders. Hiding behind the high walls of their temple, the autocratic priests were far removed from the everyday hardships facing the great unwashed. The Pharisees, who did live with among the people, kept their distance by not rubbing shoulders with their irreligious neighbors (the Pharisees called them outcasts and sinners) to keep themselves ritually clean.

Like all entrenched bureaucracies, leaders of the religious establishment lost their vision and became irrelevant. Managed by mediocrities they were determined to maintain the status quo and they were ready to fight to keep it.

That explains why they were so defensive when John the Baptist showed up out of nowhere to tip over their applecart.

Even though John the Baptist makes his appearance in the New Testament, John is actually the last of a long line of the Old Testament prophets. Like Isaiah and Jeremiah before him, John was a member of the priestly cast. John's father was Zachariah, one of the priests who lived out in the countryside who took his turn once or twice a year serving in the temple. You may remember Zachariah had the vision of an angel when he was chosen by lot to make the annual sacrifice in the most sacred room in the temple, the Holy of Holies.

Despite his heritage, John was by choice an outsider. You might say he switched sides. He was one of those God raised up to hold the religious leaders' feet to the fire.

Historically, the relationship between prophet and priest was adversarial. Entrenched in their high positions, the priests branded the prophets as freewheeling, roving agitators. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the prophets saw the priests as effete courtiers. With righteous wrath, they blasted away and John the Baptist was certainly no exception.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

In Matthew's Gospel, this is what John shouted when he noticed a small contingent of Sadducees and Pharisees who came out from Jerusalem and into the wilderness to spy on him. When the people heard John accusing the religious elites, it had to encourage them. Finally, somebody was speaking up!

On the other hand, in Luke's Gospel, John called everybody in the crowd a brood of vipers. Let's give the people in the crowd credit. Our immediate reaction to criticism is usually becoming defensive, but in this case the people accepted his verdict. Not being insulted and stomping off, they stay and asked for specific instructions to turn their lives around.

John didn't disappoint. Instead of spouting esoteric formulas, he gave simple, common sense instructions.

“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has one and anyone who has food must do likewise.”

To the tax collector in the crowd he said, “Collect no more than the amount proscribed to you.”

To the soldiers who came he said, “Do not extort money by threats or false accusations and be satisfied with your wages.”

John's teachings can be summed up in one word, repent. Literally, do a 180. If you're not finding satisfaction turn around and do it differently. As Jesus later taught, “Do unto others as you would have them do it to you.”

John preached a change in heart that would bring about a change in behavior. We call this ethics, ethics being the basic moral principles and values guaranteeing the better way to live together.

This is what the majority of the Old Testament prophecies centered on, repenting (changing your life's direction) and then living out the basic, universal principles found in the Law of Moses. Of course these universal principles can be boiled down to what Jesus called the greatest commandment, "Love God, love your neighbor and last but not least, love yourself."

Besides reminding the people how they should live together, John the Baptist's message primary task was to prepare the people for the Messiah's coming. Luke writes,

"In the 15th year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius pilot was governor of Judea, and Harry was ruler of Galilee... John went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book... of the prophet Isaiah,

'The Voice of one crying out
in the wilderness
Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled
and every mountain and hill
shall be made low...
And all flesh shall see
the salvation of God.'"
(Luke 3:1,3-6)

Until John the Baptist came on the scene there were no prophetic voices heard in Judea for almost five hundred years. Suddenly the people were excited after hearing John telling them their time of waiting was almost over. "Prepare yourselves and prepare others because soon the Lord's Anointed One is coming. Nothing can stop him, not the highest mountains or the deepest valleys. And when he finally comes, everyone will see the power of God salvation."

John's message was loud and clear but there was still some confusion. Luke reports,

"As the people we're filled with expectation and bowl were questioning in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah, John answered them by saying, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Luke 3:15-18)

When John described the One coming after him as even more powerful than he, the peoples' hopes soared. The heavens were about to birth a divine progeny. God was up to something. They could feel it in their bones. God was on the move and they needed to get ready.

Advent is about allowing yourself to get caught up in the wonder and mystery of God coming to save us from the here and now. Of course, God doesn't always come easily. Sometimes it's difficult seeing any tangible signs of God's presence where we live.

The truth is, things haven't changed much since Bible times. The world is still fragmented with powerful bureaucracies still running things. There's still tension between nations, divisions between ethnic groups and a widening gap between the rich and poor. But isn't this why John the Baptist showed up to prepare the way of the Lord? Isn't that why we should show up to prepare the way of the Lord?

A once prosperous neighborhood declined into blocks of abandoned buildings, poverty, prostitutes and drug dealers. Most of the churches relocated in the suburbs but one determined congregation remained committed to the neighborhood.

"Why are you staying here?" the pastor was asked by a colleague. "I'm sure you're doing something good here, but nothings changed much, this is one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the city."

The pastor replied, "We are here because God put us here and we believe God still wants us here. There's a lot of hurting people in this neighborhood and we just can't want them. Maybe we're only doing some good, but we believe we are doing God's will."

The voice of one crying out
in the wilderness
Prepare the way of lord
and make his paths straight
Every valley shall be filled
and every mountain and hill
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And all flesh shall see
the salvation of God.

Now it's our turn to be that voice crying in the wilderness. May our Advent meditations inspire us to repent, be satisfied with what we have, share what we have, and help when we can as we prepare the way of Lord.