

GETTING READY
Sermon preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, December 7, 2014

Every year on the Second Sunday of Advent we are reintroduced to that snarling, no nonsense prophet John the Baptist. He was charged with the awesome responsibility of preparing the way for the long-expected Messiah who, the Jews believed would usher in a reign of peace and justice to the world by restoring a broken Israel to a former glory not known since the time of King David.

For hundreds of years the Jews waited and waited for God to fulfill his promises through the prophets that the Messiah, or the Anointed One, would suddenly appear on the scene to rescue his people from the Gentile invaders, in this case the Romans who absorbed the Promised Land into their spreading pagan empire. It was a long dry spell of despair before a man named John, the son of a priest in the Jerusalem Temple, appeared out of nowhere to announce the time was near so, “prepare the way of the Lord.”

We learn from Matthew that John the Baptist was rather eccentric, wearing clothing made of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist and only ate locust and honey. Nowhere else in the four gospels are we ever given any description of the type of clothing Jesus or his disciples wore, which leaves us to wonder why John’s wardrobe is worth mentioning.

Bible scholars believe John’s camel hair clothing with the leather belt was the same worn by the prophet Elijah who the Jews believed, would reappear at the time of the Messiah’s coming. Other scholars point out John’s clothing was also traditionally worn by ascetics, holy men who lived as hermits out in the desert. Either way, John’s wardrobe made a bold twofold statement, first the rejection of a worldly society that ignores the authority of God and second the urgent

announcement that God's people must be better prepare for the messiah's imminent arrival.

But it wasn't only John's wardrobe that caught everybody's attention. It was especially what he said that grabbed the people's attention.

"Repent," he cried out, "for the Kingdom of heaven has come near... Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

When the people living in Jerusalem got word of John's appearance on the stage they were excited. Finally it was happening, or at least beginning to happen. After centuries of hard waiting God was finally coming to save and redeem his children as he did in the time of Moses. But after they trudged from Jerusalem to the middle of the desert to see and hear the prophet they had to be unnerved when John cried out, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come...Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our Father...Even now the ax is lying at the foot of the trees, every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.'"

These warnings were aimed directly at the Pharisees and Sadducees, the members of the religious establishment, even so, the ordinary people had to realize John's warning was for them too. Unfortunately while the people accepted John's prophecies, these religious leaders were instantly insulted and turned their backs on John before giving him even half a chance. After all, they thought, "Just who is this brooding upstart who dares instruct us in the ways of God? We've spent our entire lives living up to God's commandments, we don't need to be lectured about what we've already figured out, at least not by the likes of him!"

It's so easy for us to look back and marvel at this self-righteous attitude. We wonder how could those religious leaders be so blind? Why couldn't these temple scholars, who should have known better, not sensed the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in John? "Thank God I'm not like them," we congratulate ourselves.

The problem is if you think like that you're drowning in the same stew they did. Like them we see ourselves as being reasonably respectable and informed enough in our faith to know where we stand. On some level we even think we have it all figured out. I'm not saying we think we're perfect, at least in the general sense, however whenever someone points out one of our own blind spots, even in a gentle and loving manner, don't we get our backs up and mutter under our breaths, "How dare he or she speak to me like that?" Be honest, isn't your first reaction, whenever you're told that you're behaving badly, to become defensive and maybe even self-righteous because you don't like someone pointing out something you can't see in yourself because you're sure it's not there in the first place?

That explains why John the Baptist had to be so blunt and unrelenting whenever he confronted people who thought they had it all figured out. Gentle persuasion wouldn't do it, only a hard frontal attack would get their attention. And that's all John could do, speak the truth and call them out in no uncertain terms because now responsibility was on them. They could either keep their guard up and dig themselves in deeper or they could give the messenger at least half a chance to make his case and if any of it rang true, start admitting maybe you aren't as practically perfect in every way that you think you are.

Last Sunday afternoon Susan and I were watching a British miniseries based on Jane Austin's novel *Pride and Prejudice*. One of the recurring characters in the story was a cousin of the Bennett sisters named Mr. Collins. He was a clergy man and Exhibit A of a religious man who was so self-important and self-deceived that he failed miserably at being a pastor when he came to the Bennett home to commiserate with the family after hearing the youngest sister Lydia ran off with a disreputable army officer without the benefit of marriage.

Mr. Collins, feigning compassion, informed the sisters that Lydia's indiscretion ruined any chance for the other sisters to ever be married, let alone be accepted within polite society. He then congratulated

himself for not marrying one of the Bennett sisters (he earlier pursued until he was roundly rejected) and suggested they cut Lydia out of their lives forever.

Obviously Mr. Collins couldn't see his blind spot, he was a social climbing, self-righteous prig who was so enamored with hobnobbing within the upper crust of society that he completely cut himself off from the suffering in human society. Mr. Collins was indeed, by his own volition, a member of that brood of vipers John the Baptist talked about.

We've all have had unpleasant encounters with the likes of Mr. Collins, people who like to think they are always right and just about everyone else is always wrong. They enjoy lecturing others, especially those they've branded as morally, if not spiritually, deficient. And when these deficient creatures still can't or won't measure up to their standards, they cut them off. Isn't that what the Pharisees did? You see phariseeism is still very much alive and all of us can be sucked into it very easily.

So then, what should we learn from this scripture that directly speaks to us for our own good so we will be prepared the next time Christ comes near through someone who brings to our attention a fault that everyone can see but ourselves, not to embarrass us, but to help us see, learn and grow as the Spirit leads.

Maybe we first need to be aware of our tendency to be offended and get over it so we can really listen to what the other is saying. However, if you come to believe the other is actually projecting on you his or her own issues and is only out to pull you down instead of building you up and if you really don't hear the Holy Spirit reaffirming what is being said, then don't take it seriously. If however you have a gnawing sense what the other is saying is true, then take it to the Lord in prayer and allow yourself to be tested, for your good.

This is exactly what the Pharisees and Saducees refused to do and as a result their hearts hardened so hard when Jesus did finally come on the scene preaching, healing and befriending the tax collectors and

sinner they rejected him and then worked against him because they were not prepared to receive him, let alone prepare him room. Why? Oh, they already had God and his requirements all figured out and nobody else did. When you think about it, it's really sad for them because the religious leaders were passing up the opportunity of a lifetime, to maybe for the first time, grow closer to God.

Advent is all about preparing, not just for Christmas, but for Christ himself and part of our preparation involves repentance, turning away from your preconceived notions and turning towards Jesus to receive from him forgiveness for your sins but also his undying friendship that guarantees your salvation, saved from the consequences of your sin and saved for eternal life, which begins here and now.

Christ and his Kingdom are coming soon. Will you and I be ready