

Holy Spirit Church – St. Michael & St. John
The Third Sunday of Advent
Year A
December 11, 2016

Isaiah 35:1-10
Psalm 146
James 5:7-10
Matt. 11:2-11



*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
Like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. (Isaiah 35)*

The Wild Man and the Drunkard

“For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” (Mt. 11:18-19)

John the Baptist was an embarrassment to the early Christian community and the Gospel writers tried to minimize his impact. They tried to contain him, to make him fit, to recast his message only in relation to Jesus. But the gospel today raises the difficult question of John the Baptist and Jesus’ relationship with the message sent by John from prison to Jesus – “Are you the “one who is to come”?” And after Jesus’ response, only silence from the Baptist, until finally the news of John’s execution by Herod Antipas. Jesus was not what John had expected....

There is no doubt that John the Baptist was a historical figure. Born around 28 B.C., he is mentioned not only in the four Gospels and in Acts, but by the Jewish historian Josephus. John the Baptist was a prophet, in the style of the Old Testament prophets, and it is as such he is portrayed in the New Testament. But each of the Gospel writers reflects on John's own ministry and his relationship to Jesus in a different way.

It is very likely that John was born of a priestly family. The story of his birth in Luke, so closely paralleling that of Jesus, has many of the components of the births of leaders in the Old Testament. Like Abraham and Sarah, John's parents were old and without children. John's father, Zechariah, was visited by an angel, who foretold John's birth while Zechariah was at prayer in the temple. And perhaps most importantly, John fulfilled his role in the history of his people, not by following his father as a temple priest – but by becoming a prophet – one preaching in the wilderness of the end times and the judgment of God.

John the Baptist had a large following. His disciples seem to have lasted into the period of the early Christian Church. Some became followers of Jesus, as seems the case with both Andrew and Philip (in John's gospel). But others did not – and it was those disciples of John the Baptist which forced the Gospel writers to try to understand the relationship between Jesus and John and to interpret John's actions in light of Jesus' death and resurrection. In each of their stories of John the Baptist, they sought to emphasize John's self-realization of his role as precursor to the Messiah. But the fact that John baptized Jesus was a difficult one for the Gospel writers to explain. Why would Jesus, the Messiah, come to John to be baptized?

Many Biblical scholars believe that Jesus initially was a disciple or follower of John the Baptist. After his baptism, Jesus went north to Galilee while John remained in the southern desert. John continued his ministry until arrested by Herod, imprisoned in a fortress on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, and finally executed. But John's ministry influenced Jesus profoundly.

John's message was simple. God was coming soon – and he would judge the people of Israel. In order to prepare for this imminent wrath, the people of Israel should repent – turn away from apostasy, idolatry and sinfulness to the worship of the one true God. Like many of the Old Testament prophets, John spoke in terms of a fiery judgment. The images of the threshing floor, the winnowing fork and the burning of the chaff were imbedded in his preaching. But John called not only for a change in external behavior, but for a change of heart. And this repentance was to be evidenced by a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Unlike Jewish custom,

this baptism or washing was to take place only once. Then the effect of this conversion was to be seen in changed attitude and changed deeds.

Later Christians, in reflecting on the events of Jesus' life and death, saw John as the messenger who "prepared the way." Many at the time thought of John as the reborn Elijah – who the Jews believed would precede the coming of the Messiah. John himself referred to "the stronger one" who would come after him. But the gospels both confirm

and deny John the role as Elijah's successor. John spoke of "one to come" who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire – a baptism both of destruction and of salvation – but John clearly saw this person as the agent of God's wrath and judgment.

So, it is no wonder that, as he languished in Herod Antipas' prison, John sent to Jesus to ask him directly if he was the "one to come." Jesus had begun his ministry influenced by John, speaking of end times, baptizing (according to John's gospel) and encouraging his followers to repent. But quickly Jesus' ministry became one of forgiveness, healing, exorcisms and table fellowship with "tax collectors and sinners." John was accused of being a "wild man" – an ascetic prophet living in the wilderness, clothed in a cloak of camel's hair and eating locusts. Jesus, on the other hand, was seen as a drunkard, a profligate, one who courted the unclean and those outside the law completely – a bon vivant and a glutton. Both were rejected by the religious establishment, although for opposite reasons.

The Gospel today tells the story of John's disciples coming to Jesus to ask whether he was the "one to come." Was Jesus "the stronger one" who would baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit? Who would usher in the "age to come" – the judgment of the people of Israel and the Day of the Lord? Jesus' response followed Old Testament prophetic language – but rather than the passages on judgment and vengeance, Jesus quoted Isaiah in his poetry of the restoration of the exiles and the reconciliation of God to his people. He added to the healing of the lame, blind, deaf and dumb that the lepers would be cleansed and the dead raised. It was a very different picture than the one which John had painted. John expected a "baptism of fire" – the fire of judgment – Jesus brought rather the fire of love.

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So where does this leave us today? Do we see the inbreaking of God's kingdom as one of judgment, condemnation and wrath as did John the Baptist? Or do we envision it as healing, reconciling and inclusive? Does our faith produce fear or joy???

For many years, I spent Christmas Eve at the Friend to Friend Clubhouse. Friend to Friend was a day program of Episcopal Community Services in downtown San Diego which provided supportive services and a safe environment for those who were homeless or near homeless and severely mentally ill. In any given day, there were about 75 people at Friend to Friend – and over the nearly 25 years of its existence Friend to Friend developed a membership of thousands of people. On Christmas Eve, the Clubhouse was open for anyone who would otherwise be sleeping on the street. About 200 people usually came sometime during the night – and we distributed food, blankets, jackets, socks and hygiene kits. Everyone was welcome – and people came – from the street and from the shelters and from the churches...

Naturally, there was much reflection on life on such a night – clients talked about friends and family, Christmases past – and how they hoped their lives would change. Laced throughout the conversations were reflections on God. One man spent most of the night one year trying to convince me that God was punishing him – that that was why his life was so miserable. Another believed that God had killed his family in a car crash many years ago, also as a punishment. A young woman silently cried, believing that God could never love her again after all that she had done. On the other hand, there were those who spoke of many blessings – of food, shelter, friends and loving families. They were grateful for the small presents – blankets, jackets, socks. One year, a woman gave her blanket away to a young man who came late – as she said – “I already have a blanket and he has nothing.” Every year, clients helped prepare the meals – distribute the eggnog – and lead the caroling – and every year there were the accolades that this was the “best Christmas ever!”

The last Christmas I spent at Friend to Friend, a woman came in the middle of the night. She was homeless, living on the street, mentally ill, addicted and high. She came through the door crying, barefoot and with torn clothes. She had been assaulted and beaten – it was cold and rainy and she had nowhere to go. She had seen the light of the Clubhouse, knew of its reputation and had taken a chance that she would find help. The volunteers and clients who were there found her a change of clothes, heavy socks, some

old tennis shoes, a new jacket and blanket, food and first aid. She finally stopped crying and said much to everyone's surprise, "This is such a peaceful place. God must be here with us tonight!"

John the Baptist saw the people around him and knew they were not following God's will for them. He preached repentance and a change of life – and warned them about God's judgment in the age to come. The people were filled with fear.

Jesus saw the people around him and knew they were not following God's will for them – but he also knew they were broken-hearted, poor, sick and fearful. So, Jesus preached first about forgiveness, healing and reconciliation, and then about a change of life. He comforted the people with stories about God's love, and the good news that God's kingdom had indeed come!

Does our faith produce fear or joy? As we move through the Advent season– do we harbor the fear of judgment? Do we believe we can't be forgiven? Or alternatively, as the Advent preface reminds us, do we expect "without shame or fear (to) rejoice to behold his appearing?" Are our eyes open to see the kingdom of God all around us?

Let us pray:

Open our eyes, Lord,

Especially if they are

- *half shut because we are tired of looking, or*
- *half open because we fear to see too much, or*
- *bleary with tears because yesterday and today and tomorrow are filled with the same pain*

Open our eyes, Lord,

- *To gently scan the life we lead,*
- *the home we have,*
- *the world we inhabit, and so to find, among the gremlins and the greyness, signs of hope we can fasten on and encourage.*

Open our eyes, Lord,

*to a bigger vision of what you can do
even with hopeless cases and lost causes and people like us.*

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*Show us the world as in your sight, riddled by debt, deceit and disbelief,
yet also shot through with possibility for recovery, renewal, redemption.*

*And lest we fail to distinguish vision from fantasy, today, tomorrow, this week,
Open our eyes, Lord,*

*to one person or one place, where we – being even for a moment prophetic – might identify and help
someone waiting.*

*And finally open our eyes, in yearning for Jesus.
On the mountains, in the cities,
through the corridors of power and the streets of despair,
empower us to help, to heal, to confront, to convert,*

O come, O come, Immanuel. Amen.¹

¹ Cloth for the Cradle, the Iona Community, p. 35