

Anticipation: John the Baptist

Isaiah 11:1-10

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 3:1-12

December 4, 2016

Advent 2

Advent isn't just about preparing for the birth of the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. Advent is about preparing for the coming of Jesus into our lives. It invites us to open our lives and hearts to let Jesus in. Because of that, the Advent Gospel lessons hop around in what at first seems a strange, erratic way. Each year, the gospel for the first Sunday of Advent comes from late in that year's gospel, and it's apocalyptic. I didn't use that gospel lesson last Sunday, since we'd just had an apocalyptic passage a couple of weeks ago. But the apocalyptic passages remind us to be prepared, to be ready, for Jesus Christ to come again in the future. Then, the second Sunday in Advent brings us each Gospel's take on the preaching of John the Baptist, which is what you just heard, from Matthew's Gospel. Finally, the third and fourth Sundays in Advent get back to the biblical accounts of Mary and Joseph, setting the stage for Christmas.

Only two Gospels, Matthew and Luke, tell us of the birth of Jesus. *All four* Gospels frame the beginning of Jesus' ministry by telling us about John the Baptist, and Jesus being baptized. John the Baptist's message for us to repent, for us to make straight the paths of the Lord, is an essential part of preparing us for the coming of Jesus Christ. We are in a transition time as a congregation, and John the Baptist came at a transition time in our faith history. The people of Israel hadn't had a direct word of God through a prophet for many years, and they kept looking back from their dismal present to a glorious past. Now, all of a sudden, John appears and calls people to look ahead—and that's just where we need to be looking. We need to find the faith and courage to move into the future that God has planned for us. Two weeks ago, you made a faithful decision to move ahead as a congregation in the calling of a new pastor, Lavetta June Hall.

Can you imagine, though, if the search committee had received the profile of John the Baptist? On the plus side, he came from a good, solid religious family background. His father was a priest, and his mother was a cousin to Mary, the mother of Jesus. You couldn't ask for a better background than that, could you? But then there's the minus side. He didn't even go to seminary, had no tact whatsoever, and he seemed to be one of those hellfire and damnation preachers, always calling on people to repent and change their ways. Some would say that's going from preaching to meddling. That's just not the way we do things here. Not only that, but he was always attacking the local ministerial association, the Pharisees. He didn't cooperate with the denominational office in Jerusalem, either, the Sadducees. He even called them both, Pharisees and Sadducees, a mess of poisonous snakes—I like the old translation, a brood of vipers. John didn't keep office hours,

because he was always tramping away into the wilderness. He certainly didn't dress the part of a successful preacher, or even office casual. His clothes were rough and homespun. His personal hygiene was questionable after all those hot and sweaty days in the desert. And would you really want him to bring a locust casserole, to the church potluck? I don't think that our search committee or any search committee would spend long on that application, do you?

However, he was the man that God called, and the man that the nation needed, in that particular time and place. He set the stage for Jesus. He raised the questions that needed to be raised.

Like the prophets of old, John calls the people to repent, to change their ways; not just a superficial change, but a change of heart. Jeremiah spoke of a new covenant that would be written on our hearts, and John the Baptist was calling people to that new covenant. He was calling for deep-down repentance. The Greek word for "repentance," metanoia, means to change course, to do a 180. Spiritually, it means to do what your GPS says when you drive past your destination, "turn at the next corner. Go back." Like Isaiah, John is a lone voice, calling out in the wilderness, "make straight the way of the Lord." Like a village preparing for the visit of a king, it's time to clean up, paint up, spruce up, and fill up the potholes. That's the message that John proclaimed. The Greek word for proclaim has the meaning of announcing a royal decree, or a royal visit.

John preaches and people listen. It's a difficult journey from Jerusalem, through a rugged canyon, into the desert wilderness, and down to the Jordan River, but all sorts of people come. It's like a tent meeting without the tent. You could call it the only show in town, except that it's far out of town. Prophets like Elijah and Elisha, Amos and Micah, John and Jesus, seem to be more at home in the wilderness than in the city. It was into the wilderness that Abraham had followed the unknown God; it was into the wilderness that Moses led the newly-freed slaves on their way to the Promised Land. It was to the wilderness that Jesus would go to be tempted. Now it was in the wilderness that John the Baptist was calling people to repentance, to preparation for God's coming.

Who came to hear? Priests and Pharisees, princes and common people, tradesmen, farmers, soldiers, they all came to hear. They came to hear, and many accepted John's invitation, John's challenge, to be baptized as a sign of their repentance, so God would forgive their sins. But when the priests and Pharisees came, he challenged them. He called them a nest of snakes. He told them not just to repent, but to bear fruit worthy of repentance—to live lives of faithfulness and justice. He warned of destruction to come, the axe is at the trunk of the tree; the chaff on the threshing house floor is

about to be burned away. "I baptize you with water, but one is coming who will baptize you with the fire of the Holy Spirit."

Then, a few verses later in the story than where we ended it today, Jesus came, and the crusty firebrand of a prophet was almost without words. Here was one who didn't need to repent. "I should be baptized by you," John told Jesus, for he was suddenly aware of his own sin. But Jesus went down into the water and John immersed him, and the Holy Spirit descended as a dove.

So again, back to Advent 2016. What is John the baptizer telling us? In a world where we're interrupted dozens or hundreds or thousands of times a day, it's easy to lose track of where we are, who we are, and whose we are. It's easy to get so caught up in the trappings of Christmas, the expectations of buying and giving gifts, so that we forget the Christ. So John calls us to prepare the way, to straighten out the curves that would lead us away from God. That means that we need to be intentional about our prayer life, our worship life, in reading the Bible, and in helping others.

In a world where our values are constantly challenged by materialism and consumerism, where we're taught to look out only for "number one," ourselves, where we often are told to make moral compromises, we still need to repent, to change our course, to follow God's way.

John the Baptist called his listeners not to stand pat on their pasts, but to look for the Lord who was coming in the future. It's going to be a new day, one of both judgment and love, he preached. And when the agent of that new day, Jesus, came down to the Jordan to be baptized, John probably didn't know that an executioner's sword awaited him, or that a cross awaited Jesus; but he did know that no matter what might happen, God was about to change everything through this man Jesus. We don't know what will happen in our own lives, we don't know what will happen in the life of this congregation, but we do know that it is God in Jesus Christ who is calling us to follow God into that future. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon