

Ready, Get Set, Stop

Matthew 3:1-12

Crossroads Christian Church

Isaiah 11:1-0

December 8, 2012 Advent 2A

Do you ever do a double take when you hear the scripture for the Second Sunday of Advent? Wait a minute. Advent's about getting ready for Christmas, right?—the Baby Jesus and all that? So why do we talk about the grown-man John the Baptist baptizing the grown-man Jesus in the Jordan River, when according to the storyline we've been following, neither have been born yet? It's like we're on a race to Christmas, we're crouched at the starting line, and the starter raises his pistol, says, "Get ready, get set," starts to squeeze his trigger finger, then says, "stop." That jolt, that letdown, that confusion comes when we're thinking about Christmas and suddenly have another subject to deal with.

The answer is that Advent is more than just waiting for Christmas. It also involves getting ready for Christ, for opening our lives to let Jesus Christ move in. 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, prepares 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.

So, now that I've talked myself into preaching about John the Baptist, let's go ahead with the story. Luke tells us the story of Elizabeth, a priest's wife, who had never been able to conceive a child. An angel came and told her that she would have a son, and that God would have a special use for him. The angel said,

“Don’t be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord’s eyes. He must not drink wine and liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” What a promise, huh?

So fast-forward about thirty years, when this adult prophet John suddenly starts stirring up interest. The Holy Spirit was with John from the word Go. Here’s an interesting sidelight. In Hebrew, the word for prophet is *nabi*. The word for crazy man is *navi*. They’re both possessed. The only difference is who you are possessed by—God’s Spirit, *nabi*, or some evil spirit, *navi*. John lives as a hermit in the wilderness. He wears the outfit of prophets of old, like Elijah, a rough animal’s pelt. He eats the hermit’s desert diet of locusts and honey. And like the prophets of old, he has a message.

Like Jeremiah, 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, 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 2013. 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