

*You brood of vipers!* I once read that good preaching is supposed to mimic the text being preached on. So doxology should be preached in ways that praise God, and prophetic texts in ways that challenge congregations. Laments should help God's people find ways to articulate their grief within the larger context of a Christian community. Sometimes that means that as a preacher I need to remember that I've been entrusted to convey a message larger than myself, and that preaching from the lectionary means that sometimes I have to stretch out of my comfort zone in order to speak in a voice that may feel less natural for me. Today is one of those days.

Today our attention turns to John the Baptist for the second week in a row. The rhetorical scholars tell us that as he unpacks his message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins at the Jordan River he is engaged in *exhortation*. So this sermon, if done right, should exhort all of you—and me too! Exhortation is not finger-pointing, although I know that John's words can sometimes sound that way to our ears. His rhetoric, like his clothes and his diet and the desert where he delivers his message, is wild and untamed. This is not brie and chardonnay in the 'burbs! In fact, John is pretty black and white, and very direct.

The essence of John's message is *that he exhorts us to live our lives in conformity with what we say we believe*. He isn't telling us anything we don't already know. This isn't rocket science or subtle theology that requires nuance. He is simply exhorting us as we gather here on this third Sunday of Advent to live our lives in synch with what we profess to be our core values.

Notice that John the Baptist isn't running after people on a street corner in order to chastise complete strangers. Those who hear his words have chosen to go out into the Judean Desert to listen to him. Later on in Luke's Gospel, Jesus will remind the crowds that anyone who went out to see John the Baptist knew before they went that they weren't going out to see some reed shaken by the wind (Luke 7:24) or a man dressed in soft clothing (Luke 7:25) John offers no smooth words. To encounter John is to encounter a great prophet like the prophets of old. (Luke 7:26-28) To encounter John is to meet a truth-teller who speaks with a sense of urgency and immediacy—the time is Now for repentance, he says.

Like those who went out into the Judean wilderness to listen to John, we have chosen to show up here today for any number of reasons. My bet is that most of us weren't conscious when we walked through the doors that we were going to be hearing from John the Baptist again today. Yet here we are, and as I hear his words he asks each and every one of us to look in the mirror and to see in that mirror a baptized person who has promised to follow Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. And then to make choices and actions that accord with that deep truth of who we are, by orienting our lives and our priorities to be in line with that reality.

If we aren't careful, we can use words like “repentance” as little more than a cliché. We are tempted to domesticate such words as “spiritual” or “religious” but when we do that they become nothing more than a passing feeling of guilt or shame. In fact, the word “repentance” is not about how we feel. It comes from a Greek word, *metanoia*, that means “to turn around.” *Metanoia requires change*. In its proper context (out in the Judean desert) repentance is about getting our act together. For John, what matters is not how fervently we pray or how often we make it to Church—although presumably those things can help us to better remember who we are and who

we are called to become. What matters in the end, however, is how we *act* in the world and quite specifically with what we do with our money and how we behave in the public realm.

As someone noted in our bible study on Luke a couple of weeks ago, John is very practical. This isn't theoretical. It's about seeing the human condition and responding to the person who is right before your eyes with generosity and compassion. "*What should we do?*" the crowds ask John. "*Share your stuff;*" he exhorts. It's as simple as that. John isn't here to make us feel guilty about not doing enough but to exhort us to keep on that path and to allow God to work in and through us to do infinitely more than we could ask or imagine. I think the world is sick and tired of Christians fighting our petty fights; the world needs more than ever for the Church to be the Church.

"*Even tax collectors came to be baptized,*" Luke tells us. And they, too asked, "*what should we do?*" And John tells them, "*do your job with integrity...don't be greedy.*" And some soldiers also came to be baptized and they asked him what they should do and he told them not to misuse their power, because when soldiers walk into a village with guns people are usually pretty scared. They shouldn't use fear or intimidation to become bullies because they are called to something better than that, something nobler than that.

You can fill in the blanks. I think the possibilities are endless and you don't even need Walter Brueggemann to figure out what this text means! Formulate any question around any profession and ask John the Baptist what you should do on this third Sunday of Advent. The answer will be the same. Some teachers came, some hospital administrators, some lawyers and some cleaning ladies and some priests and some engineers and some politicians and some hairdressers and some librarians and some nurses and some business people and some cops and some social workers and some students. All of them came out to the wilderness and said to John, "what should we do?"

And John speaks across the centuries and says something very simple: *do your job*. If you are called to pick up the trash, then pick up the trash. If you are called to teach a child to read, then teach that child to read. If you are called to change the bedpans, then don't leave it for the next shift to do. If you are called to enact a law on behalf of the constituents who elected you to office, then tell the special interests where they can go and do your job. If you are called to be a parent, then find the time to read to your child and hold them when they are scared and tell them every day that you love them. If you are called to be a child then don't talk back to your parents and study hard and choose your friends wisely. Are there sometimes costs associated with following John the Baptist's advice? You bet! But who ever told you that following Jesus was going to be easy?

There is a line in a film I saw many years ago, with William Hurt and Holly Hunter and Albert Brooks. The character played by Albert Brooks is talking with Holly Hunter and he says to her:

What do you think the Devil is going to look like if he's around? Nobody is going to be taken in if he has a long, red, pointy tail. No. I'm semi-serious here. He will look attractive and he will be nice and helpful and he will get a job where he influences a great God-fearing nation and he will never do an evil thing... he will just bit by little bit lower standards where they are important. Just coax along flash over substance, just a tiny bit.

Exhortation isn't figure pointing. It isn't about yelling at strangers on a street corner. It's about reminding the gathered community that has been tempted all week to move the line just a little bit and lower their standards that they have a higher standard. It is to exhort the Baptized community to act like and to remember that we have been claimed by Christ and sealed and marked as Christ's own. Several times a year we stand around the font and I shake water on you and together we remember who we are:

- a people who renounce Satan and all the evil powers that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God and all that draws us from the love of God;
- a people who turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as Savior and put all our trust in his grace and love, following and obeying him as Lord;
- a people who continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship by breaking bread and saying our prayers;
- a people who persevere in resisting evil and whenever we mess up we repent and return to God;
- a people who proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ;
- a people who seek and serve Christ in all persons and love our neighbors as self;
- a people who strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.

Oh yeah, all of that *with God's help*. That is who we already are and we are called to become by growing more and more into the full stature of Christ. No one should pretend that any of that is easy. But surely it isn't all that hard to understand, either. When we speak ill of a neighbor, that's not love. When we feed gossip that hurts another person, that isn't love. When we take short-cuts in our work that erode people's trust in their government or their schools or their churches or their healthcare or the company they work for, that isn't love either.

*“What should we do, John—to get ready for Christmas?”* We should do what we are supposed to do. We should do what we all know we are meant to do, the work that God has given us to do. We should act in ways that make the world around us a little bit more loving and a little bit more just and a little bit more peaceful and a little bit more joyful and a little bit more hopeful and a little bit more life-giving. We should act in ways that set the bar a little higher. And when we do these things we know we've had a pretty good day. And tomorrow? Just plan on getting up to do it again, tomorrow, too!

That is how we prepare the way and make the paths straight and build a highway through the desert. In so doing we point beyond ourselves to the One who is greater than John and greater than the Church. We point people to Jesus. Third Advent reminds us that we don't have to be messiahs. We just need to do our jobs.