

Sermon
“Preparing the Way”
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November 28, 2010
St. John’s Chapel UCC

Isaiah 40: 1-5

Matthew 3: 1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness; ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Bear fruit worth of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children of Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear this threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

SERMON

There's no getting around John when it comes to Advent. Barbara Brown Taylor says it is sort of like trying to get around a Doberman pinscher. Here we are, busily preparing the way for Jesus' birth with Christmas tree ornaments and wreaths. We are trying to adorn ourselves with the Christmas spirit. "We are not thinking about the few dark blocks that still separate us from [the starlit barn in Bethlehem], when all of a sudden—GRROW-ROW-ROW!!!—this big old dog with a spiky collar has got us by the ankle, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" Before he is through, our heads are pounding with vipers, wrath, axes, and unquenchable fire when all we really wanted was a chance to sing "O Holy Night."¹

Yet, there is no getting around him. Every lectionary committee throws him in as our preparer of the way to Christmas. For that matter, "Every single Gospel writer introduces Jesus by talking about John, which means that in some way or another, the Doberman is God's idea. John is the watchdog who makes sure no one wanders into Christmas unprepared."² We cannot move into the land aglow with grace and dripping with love until we move through judgement: **For those who know nothing of judgment, need nothing of grace.**

For you, for me, it may seem a dreaded place to go. I'd prefer starting the Christmas season with "It's a Wonderful Life" (and often do) or Bing Crosby's "White Christmas." Who really wants to journey down to the watering hole for a dip in the Jordan at Christmas time? Who wants to trek way off into the blazing desert and traverse relentless hills of thick sand? Who wants to go borrow the neighbor's donkey or walk on foot down lonely trails infested with bandits? Who, I ask you?

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain*, p. 22.

² *Ibid*, p. 22

Well, it seems a whole lot of people did. “The people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and the entire region along the Jordan.” Oh, how the people wanted to get to that Doberman!

Dr. John White, a biblical scholar who recently taught our Adult Sunday School Class, says, “You bet they were eager to get to this John. He was willing to clean them up at no charge. No having to pay the temple authorities to remove the dirt weighing down their souls because they had violated some purity law. No having to trek back to the temple every time you got polluted. No sir-ree. This John fellow was offering a once in a life time guarantee. Once baptized, always baptized. Once clean, always clean. Not that you wouldn’t sin again. Chances are you would. Chances are, it’s inevitable—but you don’t ever again have to feel like a worthless, polluted piece of junk. Once baptized by that John fellow, you were, henceforth, a beloved child of God.

This feeling of having a dirty soul happens...for some more than others. A little girl is abused by her grandfather and forty years later, although he is long dead, she still feels dirty. A man loses his job and stays at home with the kids while his wife goes to work. Even though his wife repeatedly tells him how much he’s contributing, ingrained cultural conditioning tells him he’s worthless. A teenager’s parents are seldom available to talk. When they are, they turn conversation into sermon. The teenager becomes moody and hangs out with other teenagers moodier than he or she, thriving on anger that stems from feeling like a piece of junk whose parents don’t even like him. A wife tells her husband or a husband tells his wife that she’s/he’s fat, disorganized, not particularly smart and every other put down imaginable—and feelings of inferiority and hopelessness begin to grow—and he/she becomes trapped in a co-dependent relationship.

Yes sir-ree. This John fellow's offering to shine up our complexes so they don't feel so inferior anymore—but bright and shiny enough, prepared enough, to deck the halls for one not so proud, but secure enough, to be seen wading out into the cleansing waters—one as gentle as a child who wants to baptize us with fire.

Maybe a trip down the memory lane of our baptism (that most of us cannot remember, but is there in our unconscious memory) could make all the difference. Maybe remembering the times we have gotten past that Doberman to take up our specialness banner, to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are beloved children of God could make all the difference in how we receive Christmas this year. Then on our journey to Christmas, we might be able to claim a gentler nature in ourselves, ready to be ignited with Jesus' baptism of fire—to burn as bright as a starlit barn in Bethlehem.

- *Begin to carry with Stephan the shepherds to the altar.*
- *Once complete hymn 781 begins*