

THAT'S THE BAD NEWS, NOW THE GOOD NEWS

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Luke 3:7-18; Isaiah 12:2-6

Every family has at least one relative who is one arrow short of a full quiver. The cornball uncle who tells the same knock-knock jokes every year when the family gets together on Christmas day. The obnoxious junior high age nephew who makes flatulence noises with his underarm. The tasteless sister-in-law whose large rose tattoo is so interestingly revealed by her low cut décolletage that only the slightest amount of imagination is required to complete the picture. Every family has at least one member for whom excuses are sometimes offered, even Jesus' family.

Take John the Baptist, for instance, Jesus' cousin. A strange man much in need of a fashion consultant, given to hair shirts and leather loincloths. This, of course, would raise few eyebrows in the Village; but uptown, on the Eastside, not so good. He was odd in his eating habits; locusts and wild honey, not quite a vegan, but not a meat eater either. He was an odd duck, a sort of Al Sharpton for his time - a person not afraid of controversy, always showing up at the side of the poor and oppressed, subject to misinterpretation, and yet doing God's work.

Still, he was not without his following. Evidently the colorful person on the street was as interesting to the people of Jerusalem in the first century A.D. as they are to us today.

John was a prophet. A man who adopted an ascetic life, living the most Spartan existence imaginable. He apparently did not marry, put down no roots, traveled and stayed in the wilderness places of Galilee where thieves and robbers abounded, and there adopted a ritual form of washing to symbolize the importance of preparing for a new age about to dawn. His message pulled no punches.

"There is one coming after me the thong of whose sandal I am unworthy to untie." This coming one, he announced, would bring judgment. And clearly John envisioned that judgment to be one of fire. God's messiah would follow him, and that messiah would usher in a season of reckoning, of settling accounts, and administering punishment. John, for instance, calls the religious leaders of his day a brood of vipers and asks who has warned them to flee the coming wrath.

Yet in spite of the harsh sound of this, John, and evidently his followers thought of this coming time as one of hope. Because for those who "got it", for those who would repent and bear the fruit befitting repentance, the age to come would be a golden era, a time of God's rule over the earth. And, "So," Luke concludes, "with many other exhortations, John preached good news to the people."

Good news? Judgment, fire, winnowing, repentance. Good news! Did we miss something? If this was good news what, pray tell, might be the bad news?

John's call to repentance is the lynchpin to understanding him altogether. Most of us don't know what to do with the word, "repent." Visions of a New Yorker cartoon character come to mind. A bearded type in a hair shirt standing on the corner in Times

Square with a sandwich board over his shoulders proclaiming doom. In its original, the word repent meant “to turn around.” It means you’re going in one direction and something happens (a reckoning of some sort) and you change course, you go in a new direction altogether.

It is, in a moral sense, what it is like in the morning as you look in the mirror for the first time, before the makeup, before the shave, seeing all the wrinkles, the crow’s feet, the scars, and resolve that something more than Botox will be needed to turn this around. Repentance is looking deep in the soul and seeing the moral lack that is there and determining that something must change.

It comes in many forms. It is hearing your child repeat a word or do an act that you know has been learned from you, and being taken aback by its insensitivity. It is having your boss go over the cyber log of the surfing you have done on your office computer and being ashamed of where you have logged in. It is your spouse pointing out to you that you are spending more time at the office than you are with your four year old and her and she is wondering which is more important, the job?... The call to repentance is the intervention that happens when our behavior has so affected the lives of others that they cry out against us, that we must change or they will. Sometimes even God must get a hold of us by the shoulders and shake some sense into us.

These times of reckoning in life are never easy. They call into question the path on which we have been headed. Which is why John the Baptist makes us uneasy, he applies his message directly to the forehead of our soul, and he makes us think too much, and too painfully. Judgment and fire and winnowing and repentance... it is not a message we like to hear, from those we love, from those to whom we are accountable, from one such as John the Baptist.

In a sense I wonder how it is that John made it into the Jesus story at all, so unappealing is he and so unsettling his message. Why would the four gospel evangelists give him a major role at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry? He is such an odd and discomfiting man. It might have been tempting to dispense with him, get him off the stage, get out the hook before he got too far into a message that we would rather not hear, calling into question our values, shining light on our commitments, pointing out the discrepancies between what we profess and how we live. But no, they left him in. All four gospel writers left him in.

And why? Well, each had their own reason, but all of them knew that John the Baptist, harsh as his message is to hear, has something important, even *hopeful*, for us to understand. Of all the people that appear in the Nativity and early infancy stories of Jesus: Mary, Joseph, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna, no one in the gospels but John the Baptist gives us such a clear image of what we must do to prepare for his arrival.

And what must we do? Listen again to what he says,

The *multitude* asked him, ‘What shall we do?’ And he answered them, ‘He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.’ *Tax collectors* also came to be baptized, and said to him, ‘Teacher, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Collect no more than is appointed you.’ *Soldiers*

also asked him, ‘And what shall we do?’ and he said to them, ‘Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.’

This is not earth shattering stuff. No one is told to take up the veil, or enter the ministry, or to take a vow of celibacy or promise to give her first born child to the Lord.

John’s message is a simple one, uncomplicated, unvarnished. The way to prepare for the messiah is to get your house in order, re-establish good old fashioned ethical standards, reaffirm kindness, value compassion, practice honesty, live up to your calling. John is unabashedly moralistic and even more embarrassing, he is simplistic. He is one of these people who comes along and offers simple suggestions to solving complex ethical problems. And yes, he is naïve. For him, life has choices and one can choose the good, or not, and the good and evil are played out on the simple stage of everyday life, at work, at home, at church, in relationships with others, and within the confines of one’s own soul.

Naïve though his ethical imperative may be, we cannot afford to dismiss what John has to say, because at its essence he announces that what we do in this life counts for something. He calls us to remember that life is not trivial but important, and we are treasured. That in a world that devalues individuality and distinctiveness, who we are is known and noticed. The shine or dross of what we are is measured by its ability to reflect eternal light on the plane of daily living.

Therefore the compromises that we make at work, in our families, and among those we love are of the substance of the compromises we make with our soul. If we cheat others or lie or make gain at the expense of others it is really most at the expense of ourselves. And insofar as we withhold compassion, the kind that would deny the extra coat we own from one who has none, or the spare food that we have from someone who is hungry, insofar as we are calloused and inured to life and to the suffering of others, to that extent we are distanced from God. There is judgment in it that weighs against us. And the judgment is that we separate ourselves from God, building deep, wide chasms that become harder and harder to traverse.

John the Baptist shines the light of eternity on the darker question of whether we are seen at all. Whether we are noticed at all. Whether, in the end our lives count in one column or another.

Bill Muehl who used to teach preaching at Yale Divinity School tells a story about going to his child’s nursery school to pick him up one day. When his small son saw him down the hallway, the boy broke into a great smile and started to run toward his dad. But he had a clay horse that he had made in craft class, fired in the kiln and painted and ready to be presented as a prized creation. When the boy started to run the horse fell and broke into many pieces and the child began to cry.

His father scooped him up and said, “Oh that’s all right, it doesn’t matter.” But Muehl’s wife, much wiser in such things, said to him, “Oh but it does matter. It matters a great deal.”

Most of us somewhere along the way find ourselves sitting alone some night in the living room, with the others in the house blessedly in bed, and the TV finally off, and the last lamp throwing its glow on the ceiling. And in some fashion or another, wonder

in the late hour stillness if there is a God, whether that God really makes any difference in any tangible way and whether at this late date, compromised as we are, there is any chance of our staring afresh with something of a clean slate.

And that's where our faith and John's simple message has something hopeful to say. Into the midst of our sophisticated, intellectual, urbane world, with such complicated moralities and ethics, John the Baptist comes along proclaiming in simple, clear, and uncomplicated terms a kingdom that is brought along by simple acts of compassion and justice and right mindedness.

How does that kingdom come, the advent of which John announces? Not in great prophetic or even distinctly religious acts so much as in the simpler business of bearing fruit that befits repentance. Do the obvious, the simple. Let your word be good. Speak the truth. Forgive others. Be gentle as you go about your life. Deal fairly in business. Seek the welfare of others. Give away a spare coat. Bring some food for the food basket at the church. Tax collectors, collect no more than is appointed. Soldiers do not rob anyone with violence.

More than we know, the distinctly common bears the distinctly holy. Jesus himself said that whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones shall not lose their reward.

I know, it's all too simple. I've reduced the gospel to mediocrity, to civility to politeness. Or better said, John the Baptist has. I'll grant you that peace on earth, the kind of peace announced by the angels on that first Christmas, the kind of peace that we all wish might come in Palestine, in the Iraq, in Darfur, in Lebanon... will not arrive because we make peace with someone with whom we are angry. But it will not arrive *there* unless we can do at least that much *here*.

The massive problems of world hunger, even hunger in this city, won't be solved because we bring a few jars of peanut butter and some cans of vegetables and leave them at the church for the food pantry. But it won't be solved without it either.

The enormous lack of affordable housing and the growing problem of homelessness won't be solved because you or I spend a night volunteering to sleep at the church's shelter. But it won't be solved without it either.

Loneliness isn't going to be eliminated on earth if you or I go to visit a neighbor who lives in the building who has no relatives or visitors in these days, but it won't be reduced without it.

Dishonesty in business won't be turned around just because you deal fairly in pricing or because you write advertising for clients who don't overstate their claims, an entire field of business will not change simply because you alone have high standards. But it also won't happen if you don't.

The kingdom of God dawns ever so slowly, and often imperceptibly in the simplest and therefore the most subversive of ways, which is why every year we take all of four Sundays in advent to slowly make our way to Bethlehem. A rock after all is not worn down by a single drop, but over time the constant wear hollows it out.

It is finally very simple to make ready for the coming of God's kingdom and the birth of the One who is coming, and it has little to do with buying presents or with the decorations that you place on the mantle of the fireplace. It is done in this and every season in the simplest acts of compassion and mercy, by doing what is right as God gives us understanding of the right.

So along with stringing the lights and putting up the greens, along with entertaining and gift-wrapping and singing the familiar carols; bear the fruits that befit repentance. Do the simple, so simple acts of kindness and justice and compassion that are sometimes the hardest for us to do. And if the John the Baptist is right, when these are done, God's kingdom will not be far behind.

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