

IN THOSE DAYS

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

“In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea...” and with just that much Matthew sets the stage for the story he is about to tell. Something is about to happen and no one who hears or reads Matthew’s account for the first time can have any idea of just what will follow. But one thing is for sure, a page is turning, something new is about to happen, it’s going to be different whatever it is.

“In those days...” Matthew says. But exactly what days are *those* days, historically speaking... theologically speaking? Well they begin with a genealogy by Matthew’s reckoning, starting with Abraham and leading to Jesus. This is a long awaited messiah about whom Matthew will now tell us. So *these days* are days set in a larger context of expectation for a Messiah.

And you know the story, Joseph and Mary are betrothed, and Joseph has a dream that Mary is with child and God is in this awkward thing. Joseph is not to be afraid but to take Mary for his wife.

Then Matthew tells us about Herod - a lot about Herod in fact- advised by a cabinet of seers with dubious credentials, and sought after by magi coming from the East.

There is a twist in the plot to manipulate the magi, bait set out by Herod who implores them to return to him and inform him of the identity of this king of the Jews so that he might come and worship him, (fat chance!) ... and there the cloak of intrigue is thrown over the story. There are gifts that the Magi are bringing, gold and frankincense and myrrh, strange presentations for a newborn child. Why not a rattle or a binky? But these are special gifts for a special child.

And word comes to Joseph in a dream that he must become a refugee in a foreign land if he is to save his life and his family. So Mary and Joseph and the baby flee to Egypt for exile and sanctuary.

Meanwhile, an angry Herod realizing that he has been duped by the magicians, murders all the children in and around Bethlehem two years old or under, a kind of 1st Century Aleppo where children and newborns in incubators are attacked in hospitals. *Collateral damage* in a world bent on selfish ends and controlling people with fear. There is not much that is new under the sun.

“In those days,” Matthew says...

the *days* of an ego-inflated bully like Herod as king,

days when the empire held power over life and death - and life was cheap.

Days of palace intrigue and days of Herod’s flattering advisors offering withering advice,

days when families were uprooted from their homes and homeland, and had to flee for their lives.

Days when truth was in question and mistrust was in the air.

In *those* days God acted. When the times seemed most bleak. When Herod seemed most powerful and all might be lost, at that time, in that hour, in those days... John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea proclaiming a gospel of repentance, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” he says.

In other words, in a time such as the days of Herod’s reign and the world’s despair, when children suffered and war was never far away, and people had given up hope... in that kind of time, God did something quite unexpected.

And it didn't happen in the big city, at the temple in Jerusalem, or at the palace in Rome, or in some other way that proved by the very importance and spectacle of it that there would be some immediate awareness that everything had changed. No.

Instead, what happened was subtle, persistent, and unexpected. What happened was that John the Baptist, an unlikely man, tousled, unkempt, with locusts stuck in his beard appeared in the wilderness of Judea, of all places, proclaiming a change that was on its way and that in order to be prepared for it you needed to repent and be baptized.

Suddenly the work of God on earth narrows to a man who is a harbinger of hope. His message is likened to a voice crying in the wilderness which is hardly a likely place to launch a movement or to preach good news.

But John is not just any messenger of hope. He is a prophet after the manner of Elijah, one who would be identified with God's decisive action at the end of time. And so his appearance dressed like a prophet wearing a camel's hair coat and a leather belt, munching on locusts and dipping wild honey, helps us see him as something of a wild man, eccentric but also a man with the look and the style of an Elijah, speaking with the tone and timber of God's word about him.

He's a part of *those* days, too, John the Baptist, who appears in the wilderness, almost out of nowhere. His is the clarion call announcing that things are about to change. God hears the cry of the people and God will act if the people will respond.

They must repent, John says, which means quite literally, to turn around, to *pivot* to use a familiar word - pivot in a new direction. And baptism is the first step in acknowledging that new birth, the spiritual renewal and identification of a people with a calling.

I am so glad that we are in the season of Advent, the time when we watch for the signs of God's coming among us. And what better story on this second Sunday of the season than a story that calls us to repentance, to remember again the weird man of the wilderness who went against the grain and stood up for God, announcing the coming of one who would put to shame the world's values. Kingdoms clash and worlds collide in John the Baptizer, which may be why he seems so eccentric to us, so off beat, like someone we might dismiss in the subway or on the street. Too zealous. Too odd. Except if you listen to what he is saying... that the world's values are on a collision course with God.

And what are the world's values today? We value money and success; we judge a person's character by their portfolio. We look to Ivy degrees and Wall Street experience as signs of God's favor. We don't care how anyone got to the top, even if they crawled over others to get there. And the harsher, the more militant, the more trusting in gun-power than in God-power we are, the more respect we command.

Wealth is character. Poverty, is moralized as a curse. The stranger is a threat to us. The sojourner is our enemy. Race colors what we see. These are the world's values, cheered and chanted and sweeping our time not just our country in the fear of outsiders and the presence of the other.

This week, a colleague in ministry, Imam Shamsi-Ali, teacher at the Jamaica Muslim Center Mosque in Queens shared with those of us who are members of the Partnership of Faith, a collegial clergy group to which I belong – showed a letter that was sent to one of the members of his mosque. The message said (and I'm going to clean it up out of respect for you and for this place of worship):

“Dear Terrorist...” - and there's a word that rhymes with ‘witch’ that follows in the salutation- “we are writing to you as the newly organized Neighborhood Town Watch. We understand that you currently wear a scarf on your head, and we would like to put you on notice that this will no longer be tolerated in our neighborhood. Now that America is great again, we would like to offer you two opportunities to avoid any consequences of your poor previous decisions. First, you can take your radical

attire off and live like all Americans. Or, your second option, you can go back to the God forsaken land you came from.” (And the closing reads,) “America is Great Again, Neighborhood Town Watch.”

Last night on the 11:00 news a young woman wearing a hijab, was interviewed. She had been threatened by three drunk white men on a subway car, menaced with the same kind of language. “Get rid of the scarf, go back to your country.” But she was born here in New York, and she is a student at Baruch College, now made an alien in her own land.

Those are the values that are gaining ascendancy in our world. Let’s be clear, we are not living in the Weimar Republic of pre-Nazi Germany. Nor has the church been kidnapped as it was prior to 1934 by the German Christians movement that saw no conflict between Christianity and the ideals of Hitler’s National Socialism.

Now many people voted for change in the last election. And only a small minority voted with racist motives in mind, but that the new administration is gathering about it people who have divisive views on race, women, refugees, immigrants, and LGBTQ persons is a *sign* to us.

Because our values as people of faith are different. We are followers of Jesus Christ, called to be vigilant, watchful, and alert in the time ahead. Calling to repentance anything which does not draw us closer to the kingdom of God, for we know where history is going and we surely have to give account for what we say and what we do not say in these days... what we do and what we do not do.

In the most recent election, nearly 80% of white evangelicals voted for the President-elect.¹ And so I was surprised by an editorial written by evangelical writer and teacher Tony Campolo and Shane Claiborne this week in the New York Times. They wrote,

We are not suggesting a new kind of Christianity that simply backs the Democratic Party. Jesus is neither a Democrat nor a Republican — even if, as William Sloane Coffin Jr. once said, his heart leans left. Many faithful Christians did not vote for Hillary Clinton because of their commitment to a consistent pro-life agenda. [Campolo goes on, affirming a conservative tenet.] True faith can never pledge allegiance to anything less than Jesus. But Jesus-centered faith needs a new name.... beginning with the culture wars of the 1980s, the religious right made a concerted effort to align evangelicalism with the Republican Party. By the mid-’90s, the word had lost its positive connotations with many Americans. They came to see Christians — and evangelicals in particular — as anti-women, anti-gay, anti-environment and anti-immigrant and as the champions of guns and war.

Mr. Trump did not create these contradictions, but his victory has pulled the roof off the building we [evangelicals] once called home. It’s time to build a new home.²

Tony Campolo is right. And the way we Christians (evangelicals and mainliners) build that new place where faithfulness to Jesus dwells is by going out to the wilderness of our world’s values in these Advent days and calling out the voice of John the Baptist who beckons us to hear his cry above the noise of the crowd, and harken to his call above the howling of the wind.

“Repent,” he says, “for the kingdom of heaven has come near.... The voice of one crying in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

We Christians are at an ethical, moral fork in the road at this time in our life and in this time in our nation’s life, and the question is whether we will be a part of the values of this world that scapegoat and denigrate and put down and destroy and marginalize one another, or whether we will be repairers of the breach, healers of the broken, a sanctuary for the fearful, as well as a home for the faithful.

I am quite clear what this time and this season calls us to be and to do. You cannot prepare the way of the Lord with hatred, bigotry, racism, sexism, fear and threat. You prepare the way of the Lord with repentance, by turning away from the ways of the world and turning toward the ways of God.

How can we be an Advent church, an Advent people in this time... vigilant, watching, waiting, ready for the coming of the one who is coming? We do it by making of this place and the making of our hearts a dwelling for hospitality and peace, for security and safety, a hospice for the weary, a home for the homeless, a healer of the breach, a sign of God's love to the whole church, maybe even to all the nations.

This week a family arrived from Eritrea on the Horn of Africa, near Ethiopia and bordered on the west by Sudan. Our church is sponsoring that family Asmait, Degol, and their two-year-old daughter Efratha who moved into their new apartment in Jersey City Tuesday night. They are getting settled in with the help of volunteers here from this church and with the guidance of Church World Service.

This family has been waiting for a sponsor for the last few years in Cairo where Degol worked as an interpreter for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. They have waited a long time for their shot at freedom, to borrow a phrase from the play *Hamilton*.

They are coming this afternoon to hear Handel's Messiah for the very first time. Dr. Baker always used to say to the choir before they went out to sing Messiah that even though the choir had sung it a hundred times, someone was out there who had never heard it before. This afternoon Degol, Asmait, and Ephratha will hear it for the first time.

They are meeting their neighbors in their building. They are anxious to meet us. And they are thankful and happy to come here as *our* forebears did, to live in a land of freedom, without fear, with the future in front of them, with the dreams of freedom that brought all our forebears to these shores, freedom of religion, a free press, life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and the hope for a new beginning.

It is our work as Christians, as God's people, to see that they are not disappointed. Because in this season, in this year, to repent the world's values and prepare the way of the Lord is to embrace hospitality, to remember that even our Lord's family needed a place to stay when there was none, and safe keeping for a while from a hostile empire in order for God to work out our salvation.

To repent in these days is to claim not our exceptionalism but the common denominator of our sinfulness, our brokenness, our suspicion and fear and anxiety in these days. All too often in our actions as a people we show values we do not even realize that we embrace – We live as if God is weak and helpless, without power and doing nothing in this world, so that we act in fear and keep out the stranger, close and lock the doors, build walls, shoot the unarmed, trust no one.

In response, God is telling us the story of faith, where a young couple trust what God is doing and do what God calls them to do. God is calling us to open our hearts, trust in him, be ready for what God will do, and prepare the way of the Lord, even in the wilderness of the world's values.

It has been many years since I have felt as intensely as I do now that we individually and collectively as a church are called to be the oddballs, the eccentrics, the out of synch folks, the ones who have had the roof blown off our house, and who must renew our commitment to what it is to be Christian.

We are called to remember our baptism. Like John the Baptist. If we are fulfilling our calling we are the odd ones out, the ones on the fringe, the ones who in a time when everyone else is closing down in fear, we are opening up in faith that God is God, and God is faithful to those who love him.

Baptism is our sign, the emblem of our belonging in a community that is not of this world, citizens of the kingdom of heaven and members of the body of Christ. That's why John the Baptist's story is among the stories we read at the beginning of Advent, because by baptism we are made members of the body of Christ and individually members of him.

The other symbol of our Christian faith is a table of abundance, where bread is broken and wine is poured and all God's people, even all of us who call God by many names, gather and feast together. This is who we are, people of hospitality, going against the grain. Welcoming the stranger, inviting the outcast, protecting the weak, helping the fearful. If we are not that, then what and who are we?

Advent comes this year in a time of great change. Everything seems as if it is upended. It would be one thing if we were simply preparing for a new administration, but we are being called instead to a re-examination of our faith and values.

The church in these days is dressed in purple, the color of Advent, a solemn and reverential color, focusing on the message of a man who has led us into the wilderness, a voice crying out, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” And our answer to him is the promise of our baptism, our confidence in the one who will gather us at a table where there are no barriers, no strangers, no foreigners, a place where the lion lies down with the lamb and the child plays over the adder’s den. It is a place where all are welcome... hijab, or yarmulke, or miter, come as you are.

Come, will you? In *these* days? And gather at the table. Prepare the way of the Lord.

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¹ Tony Campolo and Shane Claiborne, *The Evangelicalism of Old White Men Is Dead*. November 29, 2016 New York Times.

² Ibid