

Advent 2

December 4, 2016

Holy Spirit, Cumming

Why was John the Baptist successful? Why was John the Baptist angry? And are the two related in some way that we can learn from as a prophetic community?

We are told in the Gospel for today that people streamed to John from the countryside and the city. He was a phenomenon with a simple message—“God’s kingdom is rushing toward us” and “We need to get on board in how we live our lives.”

Something about his message resonated in such a way that people came to him with a certain response—they confessed their sins to John and he baptized them as a sign of their commitment to changing how they lived.

John emphasized repeatedly that it was not their words or their religious identity that mattered, but rather the good fruit of how they lived their lives. John was clear and strong and yet compassionate to those responding to his message.

Yet strangely, John recoiled when religious leaders came to him wanting to be baptized. Why in the world would he do that? Aren’t all people welcome, especially those who want to join your movement? Apparently not.

John called them a “brood of vipers.” It is unclear what that term means exactly, but it does not sound good! It reminds me of what trolls on the internet write when they disagree with someone. What was John the Baptist thinking?

Well, we don’t know. At least not for sure. But we can make some informed suppositions based on how Pharisees and Sadducees are portrayed in the Gospel according to Matthew.

You see these two groups represented the powerful and the moral in the world of 1st century Judea. In some strange way, they were the most invested in the status quo that John was decrying, even though they wanted to protect it for different reasons.

The Sadducees were generally the aristocracy of that time and place. They were religious leaders associated with protecting the Temple, the center of Jewish religious life. They were generally rich or well off. They cooperated in many ways with the Roman Empire in order

to help maintain order and the way they felt things should be run in order to protect their interests related to their religion and way of life.

The Pharisees were also generally well off, educated, and invested in protecting their country and way of life. They did not work to overthrow the Romans or withdraw to the desert like John the Baptist had. Yet they were also very conscientious religiously. They worked to maintain their faith and identity, but not so much that they would inspire a crackdown from the Romans. In some sense, they tried to navigate a middle way.

Something about their approach to life pushed John's button. As a prophet, perhaps he saw them as **hopelessly compromised** unless they had a radical change. So he let them know that maintaining the status quo that would protect their power and influence was not an option if they were coming to him for validation.

As John often repeated to all people, they would need to repent and then "**bear fruit worthy of repentance.**" Forgiveness was available, but **forgiveness has consequences.** Forgiven people must change and live differently, known for being people who show compassion and forgive-- even enemies. That's what John—and God-- required.

So for these status quo people, John gave this scary image—"the axe is lying at the root of the tree." What does that mean?

Trees are interesting organisms. When I read up about them, I found that they are often interconnected through their root systems in ways that people do not understand. Trees in jungles cooperate to help sustain and provide life. That is how trees work in nature.

For humans, though, trees are different. We like to measure trees based on fruitfulness. If we had an orchard, we would evaluate trees based on fruit yielded. And we eliminate those trees that are unfruitful, a waste of space, so to speak.

That is the image that John gave to religious people who do not produce the fruit that God calls for in society. Sobering judgment that gets my attention and I hope yours, too.

So coming forward two thousand years-- from the time of John the Baptist and Jesus-- what does this fragment of a faith story say for us today? What would John's message be for all of us? Would it be the same or different?

And who are today's Sadducees and Pharisees? Are they still the powerful people, especially our religious and political leaders? I think that is a good guess.

But it is not particularly helpful to spend our time saying what is wrong with society and its leaders. Most of us are not as pure as John the Baptist. I have not prayed in the desert for

years and lived simply enough to speak with the authority of a prophet like John. I would offer a different approach for the rest of us reflecting on John's message for today.

Instead, think about all those people who streamed to John and what their response was: they confessed their sins. They didn't point fingers at Pharisees or Sadducees or the Romans or whatever; **they owned their part** of what was wrong in their lives and the world. That is powerful and a place we can all start to live (if we are not already there).

So the next time we criticize someone or some group, we need to stop ourselves and instead ask, "**What is my part in this problem?**" Let's make this a spiritual practice in Advent: for every criticism I make of someone else, I need to come up with at least one thing in my life that **I need to own** as part of the wider problems in society.

For example, if I see someone acting in some anti-social way, it is easy for me to shake my head and wonder what is wrong with that person or the world in general. When I do that, I am not making a difference. So instead I want to catch myself and own my part in the problems of this world. Then ask how I can "bear fruit worthy of repentance."

This approach is not about being a "do gooder." It is about living as forgiven people. It is about sharing with others the compassion we have received from God. It is about living differently thanks to God's grace.

We can do this through simple, everyday things like common courtesy—opening doors for people, letting cars merge in traffic, asking people how their day was (and then actually listening to them).

We can also stretch ourselves. Because this world is hard. There are many challenges. Many if not most of us have different struggles, some of them unknown to others.

So let us remember that and be people of compassion. We can be vulnerable and let people know when we need help. And we can be attentive and help our brothers and sisters when they need it. This congregation does a pretty good job of that when one of our own gets sick or a loved one dies.

But there is more that we can do. One possibility that is just starting to develop is what we have called Driving Buddies. It was inspired from a talk Judge Rusty Jackson gave during Adult Sunday school back during Lent.

People under his court's supervision often need to get to places all over the county—for visitation with their children, parenting classes, personal counseling, court appearances, and so on. Often they do not have transportation—either because they do not own a car or they do

not have a license due to a DUI. We looked at doing something with other churches back in the spring, but it did not happen.

So Rusty and I recently communicated about trying an experiment to meet this need. I met with Rusty and his team this past week and we discussed this idea. His office will assign just one person to our church and we will have a team of volunteers work with that person's schedule to help them fulfill the court's requirements. This way they have a chance to get back on track in life.

If it works, we hope to help more and more people and get other churches involved. Because we all need help and we all need to share the compassion that God gives to us.

John the Baptist knew that sometimes society makes it hard for someone to change their lives. When we do that, we are acting too much like those Pharisees and Sadducees that John the Baptist condemned. But when we repent and open our eyes, learn what we can do and do it, then we bear fruit worthy of repentance.

The kingdom of God is rushing toward us—and John's words still call us to get on board.

Amen.