

Get ready!

Is 11.1-10; Ps 72. 1-7 and 18-19; Rom 15.4-13; Mt 3.1-12

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Now, in those days, John, (who was known as the one who immersed people in water), appeared in the desert of Judaea, preaching and saying: "Reconsider your ways, for the kingdom of the heavens is close at hand." This man, John, was the one concerning whom Isaiah the prophet had spoken when he said: "There is a voice coming forth from the desert. It is saying: "prepare ye the way of the Lord; make his paths straight". Now, this (man) John had a cloak (made) of the hair of a camel and (he had) a leather garment covering his loins; he ate only locusts and wild honey.

Then, (the inhabitants of) Jerusalem, the rest of Judaea and the regions around the Jordan came out to him, and, as they confessed their failings, they were immersed by him into (the waters of) the river Jordan. But, when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees also coming for him to immerse them in the water, he said to them: "You offspring of vipers! Who showed you that you should flee from the coming wrath? Go away and begin to produce fruit that shows that you have reconsidered your ways. And, don't presume to say to yourselves: "we do not need to reconsider our ways, since we have Abraham for our father", because I tell you: God would be able to raise up offspring for Abraham from these stones if he so desired!

"But, know this, all of you: the ax has already struck at the root of the trees. Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I am (now) immersing you in water as a sign that you have reconsidered your ways and are preparing for the coming kingdom. But, the one who is coming after me, whose sandals I am not even worthy to untie, will immerse you in holy spirit and in fire. The winnowing fork is already in his hand. He will cleanse the threshing room floor: he will gather the wheat (, his good fruit,) into his granary, but he will burn up the chaff with a fire that will never be put out!

Are you ready?

As soon as I say this around this time of year, people start thinking that I am talking about Christmas shopping. Or, if I say it in this context of church, someone may say: is he asking whether we're ready for a long sermon!

But, what I really mean is: are you ready for what John is saying is coming?

Sometimes people get news that cause them to shake, their legs to give out from under them.

Were you shaking, as I was, after the reading of those words of John the Baptist? You should have been, because those words were hard-hitting. If you weren't shaking, perhaps it was because I did not read them well enough or clearly enough. The words are intended to cause you to shake.

Let me remind you of what John said.

- He starts by saying to anyone who will listen: "reconsider your way of life, because the kingdom of God is at hand."
- People listen to him and start admitting that their lives are not the way God would want them to be: he immerses them in the Jordan.
- Then, religious leaders appear, probably out of curiosity. They apparently don't feel any need to reconsider their way of life: why would they? They're the religious leaders.
- Yet John has his harshest words for them: "sons of snakes, get out of here; just because you're religious leaders doesn't mean that you don't need to repent or reconsider your life. In fact, you should be all the MORE interested in doing that, given that you are the ones responsible for the spiritual life of the people gathered here. Why have they so failed in living their lives before God if not because you have not provided the right kind of guidance?"
- And finally John turns to everyone and says: "you think that my message is harsh? Just wait till the one who comes after me! That one who is coming will not simply wash away your sins, as I do, symbolically, with water, but will remove sin altogether and purify this world by casting fire down upon it. He will draw off the faithful into safety and he will destroy the world with fire, a fire that can never be put out. So get ready!"

Wow. This is not the Disney World of so many of our Anglican prayers and hymns, a world in which we somehow think that peace, order and good government will just kind of naturally spread around the world. The words of John the Baptist, that is, John the one who immerses people into water in order to prepare them for the great sorting out at the end, suggest much more of a struggle and a conflict. Are you ready for it? Should you be?

These words should sound somewhat familiar to you. They are words that would be quite welcome in some circles today, circles that cry out for Holy War. They scream for the cleansing fire of God's purification of the world from evil and Satan.

And they are words found in our Scriptures.

Now, I ask you: if this reading that I have given of John the Baptist's words is fair, and I can guarantee you that it is: how is this in any way the Good News of our Scriptures, much less Advent preparation for Christmas?

To answer that, let's remember what happened during that first Christmas. The days leading up to the birth of Jesus were days in which Palestine was a divided land. As troops of the great superpower that Rome was occupied the land, religious leaders were divided among

themselves: some of them preached collaboration with the superpower in order to save the people; they were considered sell-outs by the people. Other religious leaders preached revolt and the final, fiery victory of God. John was among them. During this time, some of the people looked to a king, who an ally of Rome. Others looked to God to raise up a leader from among the people because they hated the king. They wanted someone who could lead the people in a war against the King and the superpower that supported him. Drought and famine plagued the land. The economy was in a shambles. Shopping malls? All that there was were markets selling enough produce for people to survive on. Barely. This was the first Christmas. Does it sound familiar?

Now, given how much that situation sounds like one we know very well from our headlines today, we should have no trouble connecting with the desires and wishes of people like John at that first Christmas. It's not surprising, is it, to find the people streaming to the wilderness to heed the voice of one who proclaims God's final judgment, to prepare themselves by renunciation and ritual cleansing and prayer and fasting. Because, if God is going to judge the nations, we want to be on God's side.

No, it's very familiar to us from the headlines coming out of Afghanistan today. But, it is also true that the Bible is full of the same kind of voices. It is the language of the prophets of the Old Testament, isn't it? It is the language of Isaiah, of Jeremiah, of Amos, of Joel. Why, because it is the experience of Israel that they regularly stray from the path, and that their priestly leaders, like Eli, do too. When that happens, God raises up a Samuel to denounce evil and bring the people back on track. Their political leaders stray, too, like David. And when that happens, God raises up a Nathan to call the King back.

One of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament is the prophet Elijah, whose job was to call the priests and the religious leaders back, as well as to denounce the evils of King Ahaz and Queen Jezebel. And Elijah did so in uncompromising and unequivocal terms: I want your surrender, and I want it now. No bargaining, no deals. And you will stand trial for your crimes.

Well, today, in our Gospel reading, we have heard the words of Elijah, returned from the dead to proclaim judgment. Because John the Baptist is really Elijah. He is Elijah come back, just as the prophet Malachi had predicted: "Behold (says the Lord) I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse." And lo and behold, in the desert, a voice, clothed in the same kind of clothes that Elijah wore, camel hair and leather garment, calling people to prepare for judgment by getting their lives in order.

Like Elijah, John sees that he is just a precursor, someone who will prepare the way. The great judgment will be carried out by God and any agent or agents that God chooses to use to do the job. And when the Lord comes to his Temple, says Malachi, who will be able to stand it? Who will be able to endure the day of his coming? For his will bring down fire, like a refiner's fire,

and melt away all the dross, leaving only the gold and silver. The Messiah, this year, should have new meaning for those who hear these words sung.

John knows that when God rains his fire of judgment upon the earth, the fire of judgment will start in the Temple, but it will quickly spread to the synagogue, where the Pharisees have chained the people to the fulfillment of a law that even they do not fulfill. And from there it will spread to the whole world as God shows his power and bring even that great superpower that is Rome to its knees, along with those who have contaminated themselves with Gentiles. And, so, what John expects is a kind of divine jihad that will be unleashed by God through the one who comes after him: first the Temple, where the Sadducees are, will burn; then the synagogues, where the Pharisees are, will burn; then the land, and then Rome itself will burn.

And the one who will bring it all about? Why, Jesus, the Christmas baby! We know that it is in fact Jesus, whom John will see coming to him, upon whom the Spirit of God will rest. This will be the sign to John that in fact Jesus IS the one who will cleanse the world with spirit, and also with fire. That it is Jesus who will sort out the bad and the good, saving the good and annihilating the bad.

And that's exactly what happens, right?

Of course not. That's not at all what happens. Jesus starts to go forth and rather than fire from the heavens, either in the form of Sodom and Gomorrah or the World Trade Centre, he starts to do good to all that he finds, Jew and Gentile, religious leader and poor, abuser and abused. Oh, he will stand up against Satan himself and against any who ally themselves with Satan, from whom he will ultimately demand an unconditional surrender, but Satan is a kind of heavenly creature, and those who ally themselves with Satan are really evil creatures. But, to the vast majority of us poor creatures down here, people who really are pretty insignificant even in our own eyes, Jesus will exercise extraordinary patience and generosity and grace, even to the point of making us kings and coheirs with him. Jesus does not engage in a jihad against the Gentiles and against their sympathizers. In fact, Jesus heals and does good indiscriminately. When Paul later becomes a follower of Jesus he reminds the multicultural Christian congregation in Rome that God is not partial to Jew or Gentile, and in fact, it is Jesus, the descendant of David, son of Jesse, in WHOM the Gentiles will hope!

So, where does this leave John, and his fiery preaching? After all, John IS the one who started to prepare people for the great judgment day of the Lord. Well, it leaves him bewildered. By the 11th chapter in Matthew's story of Jesus, John is so bewildered by what Jesus is doing, Jesus, the one whom John thought would begin to sweep away all the impurity and evil from the earth, that John, who has been imprisoned by the evil king Herod the Great's evil son, actually sends emissaries to Jesus to ask him point blank: are you REALLY the one that we have been expecting for so long, or is there another? Why? Because John says to himself: This isn't the way it's supposed to happen! This isn't what I expected! Where is the fire? Where is the judgment? Where is the devastation of the enemies of God?

What Jesus answers John in that same chapter is very important for us to hear today, on this Sunday when we celebrate the preaching of John the Baptist as a preparation for the coming of the king. Jesus says: yes, I am the one, and yes there is a judgment, BUT the kind of jihad like sorting out that you foresaw, John, is not what God had in mind for his people. What Jesus tells John at that point is that the sorting out does happen, but that it is what happens whenever and wherever people see the hand of God doing good things, not bad. It is what happens when the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached, and those who see and hear this either delight or gnash their teeth in grinch-like opposition. Those who see God doing good things, be it to the poor or the religious leaders, to the friends of God or to the enemies of God... those who delight in these things that God does are on God's side. They will be very happy to join God in the Kingdom that God has prepared for his people. Conversely, those who are not happy with those things, who wince in grinch-like anger every time God does another good deed to someone, will clearly not be happy in the kingdom of God with a God who does such things.

Now, you may be thinking to yourself: who could possibly be upset by the good things that God brings about through Jesus. Who could possibly NOT be pleased seeing these things happen? Surely, everyone who sees the sick healed, the poor evangelized, the prisoners freed will rejoice? Surely everyone who sees adulterers become faithful, liars tell the truth, and oppressors become life-givers as Isaiah prophesied about Jesus will rejoice?

But, that, as you very well know, was not what happened. If it had been, Jesus would never have been executed. No, what Jesus found were a lot of people who were offended by what he did. He did in fact find many people for whom these things were NOT good. Why? Well, because Jesus did it on the wrong day, or he touched the wrong person, or he healed one of my archenemies, he let someone go who should have paid his full debt to society. No, there were many people whom Jesus encountered who, as it turned out, would not find themselves happy in the Kingdom of God when they realized what that kingdom was like, when they saw that God was not a God of vengeance and holy war, but a loving, compassionate and infinitely merciful God. And, for the most part, they were the religious leaders of Jesus' day. Unfortunately, they still are today, which makes people of conscience sometimes wonder about the value of religion at all!

Who knows whether John himself ever "saw the light" and realized that, while he was right about a coming sorting out and right about Jesus being the one to do it, that he was completely wrong, as men often are, about how that would happen. We don't know what happened to John. Even Jesus himself will say about John: there is no one greater than John of all those who have come before me, for he is truly Elijah come back from the dead to prepare my way; but, even the least of you in the Kingdom of God is greater than John himself. Why? Because you know how the sorting happens, you know what judgment consists of, and John couldn't believe it. It consists of seeing God's good work and simply saying "yes" to it and living your life according to that "yes".

I don't know whether John ever saw the light, but I do know that you can decide for yourselves. For, my friends, there is only this one judgment, a judgment between, on the one hand, those who rejoice when they see the work that God does in the world whenever, wherever, why ever and among whoever it happens, those who see that work and praise and thank God, and, on the other hand, those who grumble and complain and curse the fact that God hasn't acted as they wanted Him to act or has not acted only for those whom they favour. Which side are you on?

My friends, this Advent, as you get ready for Christmas, look around you and see the good work that God has done, is doing, and will do. And when you see it, rejoice and be glad, for this is what it will be like to be in the Kingdom of God, forever. And, when you rejoice, go, and live your lives the same way, to the glory of God.