

# A Voice in the Wilderness

*Matthew 3:1-12*

I often start my sermons with a (hopefully) funny story that is somehow, at least tangentially, related to the sermon topic. I didn't have one this week, so I went to a website I often use, and did a search for humorous stories for the second week in Advent. For the first time I can recall, the results came back, "There is no humor for Advent 2." I guess you could say that, if you read the Gospel lesson.

So here is a story that is seasonal, at least in the part of the country I come from: The father and young son were excited about going deer hunting together for the first time. The father started off giving his son a little advice, "We should split up so we can cover more ground. Now remember, if you see a deer, shoot it. But don't leave your kill, or a poacher will get it. If you are approached by a poacher, threaten to shoot him. I'll come back and help you later."

The son was still a little confused, "What does a deer look like?" The father replied, "It's brown, with long ears and four legs."

Soon, the father heard a shot and went running to the spot where he heard it. He found his son pointing his gun at a terrified farmer. Drawing nearer he heard the man say, "Okay, boy, it's your deer. I just want to get my saddle off of it."

Today in our Gospel reading we are introduced to John the Baptist. Just how important is he to the Christian faith? Consider that only two of the four Gospels (Matthew and Luke) begin with stories of Jesus' birth, but all four preface the narrative of Jesus' ministry with an account of the ministry of John the Baptist. That it was considered essential to begin the gospel story in this way is suggested by the speech attributed to Peter in Acts 10:36-37: *You know the word which he sent to Israel. . . beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached.*

John is as central to the gospel story as any one person, with the exception of Jesus himself. Like the prophets of old, John threatened Israel with divine judgment and summoned all to repent and amend their ways. Unlike his predecessors, John offered a sacrament of repentance.

We've gathered here today on the second Sunday of Advent to continue to prepare ourselves for the coming of our Lord. This task of preparing for the arrival of the Lord is not as easy as we might think it is. As in other areas of life, we find ourselves having to unlearn some things in order to see what the scriptures teach us about God's act in Jesus. We've let the culture around us snatch away much of the meaning of the birth of the Savior. We have to reclaim that meaning if we really want to be ready for what God is still doing in the miracle of Christmas. This morning we will hear about the meaning of the arrival of Christ from someone who may actually have gotten ahead of himself.

No one is better for helping us get back to basics than John the Baptist. John was about as outrageous as they come. He certainly was never boring. No one ever slept through his sermons. His contemporaries considered him a prophet, one who interpreted God's ways to the people. Prophets had been in short supply for a long time. Without prophets, the faith of the people might shrivel up. Maybe that is why John drew such large crowds. Let's not miss the significance of what Matthew tells us about the crowds that came to hear John preach. People came from Jerusalem and Judea to hear John preach in the wilderness near the Jordan River. Urban dwellers and country folk don't usually like the same kind of preaching, but John drew them both in.

This wasn't a case of people being in the neighborhood and stopping by to hear John. John's congregation went a long way to hear him. His sermons must have been so genuine, so compelling, and so prophet-like that people made the effort to get there before the pews filled up.

Would we even tolerate John's preaching today? John certainly had an interesting preaching style. Most preachers warm up the crowd with a joke. Most preaching professors tell their students to say "we" instead of "you," as in "*we* need to repent," not "*you* need to repent." John ignored such niceties. He looked right at the religious leaders of the day, snarling out the words, "*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*" According to one New Testament scholar, the image here is of snakes slithering as fast as they can out of a burning field. People often say that they want sermons to be biblical, so here's a biblical sermon. Is this really what we want?

When John really got cranked up, his words must have blistered the ears of all those people who came such a long way to hear him. When John begins the heart of his sermon in verse 10, the judgment roars out. Fire seems to be John's favorite threat. John presents two images of judgment. The first is an axe chopping down a tree that bears no fruit. The dead wood will be tossed into the fire.

The second image is familiar to every farmer. The farmer sifts the grain with a winnowing fork. The heavier wheat falls to the ground. Usually the chaff just blows away. John tosses the chaff into the fire along with the dead wood.

These two images are the part of John's message with which we wrestle this morning. John sees the arrival of the Messiah with heavy emphasis on wrath. John may well have been furious about the corruption of the people of God. If scholars are correct that John was an Essene, he had gone out into the wilderness as a protest against all of the Jewish leadership of his day. The Essenes thought that everyone had it wrong. They went out into the wilderness to get away from the Romans and the Jewish leadership. They wanted to worship God in their own way. We don't know exactly who John had in mind when he predicted that the trees would be chopped down and thrown in the fire along with the chaff from the wheat. We might be safe in assuming that he thought the corrupt religious leaders would at least be set straight when the Messiah arrived. The writings of the Essenes support the idea that the coming of the Messiah would

prove a comeuppance for those who oppose God. One of their prayers implored God to "Lay Thy hand upon the neck of Thine enemies."

How does this work for us as preparation for Advent? We usually think of the Christmas season as a time for peace. During a war, both sides used to honor a cease-fire around Christmas. We hope Christmas will be a kind of cease-fire in the stress and strain of life. We are used to quotes from the Bible in our Christmas cards. How often do we find Christmas cards that talk of the chaff being burned in unquenchable fire?

Not only do John's words grate on our ears during Advent, they seem not to be a real description of Jesus' actual ministry. If John expected the arrival of Jesus the Messiah to be the time when corrupt leaders — both religious and secular — would be put in their place, then that is not what happened. Jesus healed and taught, both signs of the coming near of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' ministry was not a time when the trees were cut down or the chaff separated out, with all of it burned up. The religious and secular leaders did not change because of Jesus' ministry. They did not face punishment for their sins or God's wrath for their corruption. Even the Essenes understood that the coming of the Messiah would be a time of healing. As one of their prophecies puts it, "For He will heal the wounded, and revive the dead and bring good news to the poor."

Ironically, John understood his own ministry in connection with Isaiah's words about preparing a way in the wilderness. Isaiah's words originally were a message of comfort and hope to people whose souls were dragging the ground. Isaiah's words offered forgiveness and encouragement to those who thought God had turned the divine back on them. Jesus' earthly ministry was closer to Isaiah's original intent than to what John had in mind. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers blessings to those who are downtrodden and at the end of their spiritual ropes.

Matthew records John's words, even if they did not quite fit with what the first coming of the Messiah meant for the world. The church assigned this passage for this morning. If we hang in there with this passage it still might help us understand Christmas.

Do we not share some of John's apparent anger at the corruption of the world? Don't we grieve over war, crime, hatred, abuse, and a host of other ills? Isn't it true that we read every year at Christmas time of someone who steals from a charity that is trying to help needy children? One of the questions John's sermon raises is why the evil of the world is still as strong as it is if the Messiah has already come. If we are honest with ourselves we know that we are not what we ought to be.

Maybe the persistence and intractability of sin is a good background for reading John's words here. John gives us powerful, almost frightening images: trees chopped down and chaff thrown into unquenchable fire. What exactly does he mean? He doesn't specify who the trees and chaff are. We often think he means the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

We can sometimes be too self-righteous looking at the Jewish leaders in the New Testament. We want to make them the bad guys. We forget that we can be just as legalistic, unseeing, stubborn, and arrogant as we think they were. Even if the New Testament seems to condense all human foibles into the Jewish leaders, we should remember that they are a mirror for us. If all of the evil people are chopped down, where would the chopping stop? What if the chopped down trees and burned up chaff refers not to specific people, but to evil itself, even the evil inside of us? Some of the writings of the Essenes seem to support that idea. One of their documents talks about what God will do with evil and injustice. The document says that at the appointed time of judgment, "God will then purify every deed of man with His truth" Might John be promising us not the destruction of evil people, but the destruction of evil and injustice themselves?

John's timing may have been off. The first coming of the Messiah did not accomplish the destruction of evil. Still, John the Baptist holds out this hope for God's continuing work in creation. We may not quite be ready to put John's sermon on a Christmas card, but a promise of the complete destruction of evil is cause for joy and celebration. Let us be thankful to John for helping us understand what we celebrate this season. But let's hold on to the promise of a time when the evil of the world has been chopped down and burned up.

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