

**Matthew 3:1-10; Isaiah 2: 4 “Harvest of Wheat and Chaff” Rev. Janet Chapman
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Barbara Lundblad tells of a Vacation Bible School experience she had as a child where the theme was “putting on the whole armor of God” from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. That summer a creative leader came up with the idea of fashioning helmets of salvation out of old Clorox jugs. You cut off the bottom, trim parts of the sides to accommodate little kids’ ears, stick some feathers in the spout on top, and voila! You have an army of little medieval knights running around the churchyard, preparing for some kind of battle. In response to this story, Peter Marty, editor of Christian Century, recently had a wild dream regarding such an image. What if every politically over-zealous Christian in our country, especially those using “armor of God” language to crush those who don’t align with their views and sense of superiority, crammed their head into an empty Clorox bottle? Maybe a whiff of residual bleach would help clean up and clear their mind of that angry, vengeful, and apocalyptic rhetoric they are always spouting? Maybe it would cease the practice of turning every political battle into spiritual warfare? We are living in a time where a discouragingly large number of political and evangelical leaders and their followers are integrating combat language into their understanding and practice of Christianity, often using examples like John the Baptist to justify their militant views.

I imagine John the Baptist as depicted in Matthew’s Gospel would be horrified to know he had become the poster child for mocking, humiliating, intimidating and crushing those who question the face of power. Paul the apostle would wince in anguished sorrow to see his words regarding putting on the “armor of God” being used to undergird ideological purity and initiate a “360-degree holy war” as one leader called it. If you are as tired of this militant

Christianity as I am, my word to you is simple: The peace of Christmas is waiting for you. It's actually waiting for all of us who claim Christ as Lord, including those smitten by the aphrodisiac of controlling power, who are walking around with old Clorox bottles on their heads. Wherever we situate Bethlehem, let's be clear that it is far away from the corridors of power. That is what John is trying to get at as he preaches by the Jordan riverside. John is accusing the religious leaders of completely misrepresenting God's dream for humanity. He calls for accountability and repentance for when their power and greed have misled them. Their priorities are out of line with God's will which causes trouble on many fronts.

A story is told about a military expert who was asked to deliver a speech in St. Louis during World War II and he had a difficult time securing a seat on an airplane. After finally getting on a plane, he had a layover in D.C., only to get bumped by a very arrogant and entitled army general who demanded top priority. This meant the man had to sit and wait for the next plane to Missouri. His disappointment was nothing compared to the army general's disgust upon arriving in St. Louis only to find out that the speaker he came to hear dared to cancel the engagement. Come to find out, the man whose seat he had preempted in D.C. was none other than the speaker himself. It is a reminder that those in power are often more effective when they take seats of humility rather than superiority. Welcoming the realm of peace often means stepping away from the corridors of power and embracing a manger so small, there's no room inside of it for arrogance or pompous attitudes. God shows up in profound humility, taking up very little oxygen in that cattle stall. There was no coercion in the air, no imposition of will, no compulsion to intimidate the shepherds angling for a glimpse. In the awesome simplicity of a child, God comes to redeem hearts, but not to not to make self-righteous power plays or

advocate for siege mentalities. God comes to show folks how to beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Yet history tells us those kinds of messages aren't well-received then... nor now.

When we read Matthew's vivid, even jolting, description of John the Baptist and his confrontational message, it makes us wonder if maybe, just maybe he shouldn't find a better job during the season of Advent. We know what will happen to him if he doesn't stop all this in-your-face preaching and start acting like the rest of us. His parents, instead of naming him after his father Zechariah, did what God said and named him John, which means "God is gracious." But Alyce McKenzie points out he is hardly acting that way, out in the wilderness like Amos, demanding that people place God as their top priority in preparation for meeting the Lord. If John keeps it up, we should be afraid for his life. Maybe he just needs to be kept occupied for the next few weeks, keep quiet and not ruffle feathers. Maybe he could be our personal shopper for the time being; you know, encourage him to sit down at the kitchen table and flip through the ads and catalogs. He could make a list, check it twice for whose naughty or nice, and go shopping for us. Maybe we could distract him by taking him to Redding Garden of Lights, bring him to the office holiday party, pull a few strings and get him a role as Santa at the Mt. Shasta Mall. He could sit on the Santa throne listening to our kids tell him what they want for Christmas. Anything but what he is doing in our text today, causing conflict with some who are not that different from us.

Even if we could get him to change his tactics, he wouldn't cooperate. You'd think his motto was, "So many potential dangers, so many adversaries, so little time!" He will offend almost everyone before long, including King Herod who pushed aside his first wife to marry the wife of his half-brother, which ultimately gets John beheaded. I guess John really isn't cut out for our cultural

Christmases. He'd be a horrible Santa on a fire engine in a Christmas light parade. Instead of tossing out candy canes and wishing everyone a Merry Christmas, he'd be shouting, "This year better be different, you better turn around and repent, if you want any chance for peace!" Instead of listening to what we want for Christmas, he would be telling us what God wants from us. Instead of making a list of Christmas presents needed, he would be making a list of places God's presence is needed. For peace isn't the absence of trouble, it is instead the presence of God.

A story is told about a hot day in the summer when a lion and a wild boar went to a spring to drink. "Step aside," the boar said, "I was here first." The lion replied, "But I showed you where to find the spring, so I will be the first to drink." Quickly, the disagreement escalated from a verbal confrontation to attacking one another with great ferocity. A few minutes later, they stopped to catch their breath and saw some vultures seated on the rock above, waiting for one of them to be killed. The sight brought them to their senses, they turned around and faced each other and quickly made peace saying, "If we continue to fight, the only winner will be the vultures." It is the presence of God that makes such peace possible. And it is John the prophet's stern warning that brings us back to our senses, who turns us around from combat to compassion, from trivial to the transformative, from a space of irritability to incarnation. John has the courage to confront us with the preparation God demands for the Coming Messiah. I guess instead of trying to find John another job, we can thank him for the job he's doing. Because if we don't turn around from the direction we are headed, we won't see who is coming. We won't recognize the One who uses a winnowing fork to divide us into wheat, which is useful for feeding a hungry world, and chaff, whose tough kernels of grain have no purpose. Without John's challenge to repent, we will not be ready when the Coming One arrives.