

Advent 2 - Year C
Church of the Messiah
December 7, 2024

Often, we forget that there are two special babies in the story of Jesus coming into the world. Jesus, of course, but then there is John—his cousin. John is the baby who leaped in Elizabeth's womb when Mary visited her. Even before they were born, John pointed the way to Jesus and told those around him to pay attention. The world was about to change forever.

This morning, we meet the adult John, commonly called John the Baptist (or John the Baptizer). As the Gospel reading opens, we have every reader's nightmare - a list of names and places that seem impossible to pronounce. Why?... All the information sets the scene for when this was happening and who held power in governmental and religious terms at the time. Who held earthly power, that is.

Then, John speaks to that power with a radically different perspective. John traveled around with a specific message - "Pay Attention! Repent! Be baptized and live a different way. Get ready for the one who is coming." John quoted the prophetic messages that would have been familiar at the time. Passages from Isaiah spoke of the literal and metaphorical changes that would come with the arrival of Jesus. The landscape of our hearts and the world would be changed forever.

The word repent is an interesting one. I must admit, my mind goes straight to street evangelists. The Latin root goes in two directions - to "creep or crawl" ... or "to be sorry or regret."

The Greek gives us the wonderful word "Metanoia," which means to "exercise the mind" or "to have understanding."

The Hebrew root is based on the verb "to return."

So, to repent is not just to "turn around" or stop doing what we currently do. It is a crawling back to Jesus with a changed heart and mind. It is a new way of living based on inner transformation. The desire to live differently. It would be easy to discount John. After all, he has been painted as being a little crazy. Wearing animal skins and eating off the land... Intentionally spending time in the desert and inviting people with a (sometimes) scary level of passion to step out of the ways they were living. Even the image we have here in our sanctuary makes him look a little like a wolf kid. I encourage you to come look after the service.

As many of you know, I spent most of my ministry before the priesthood serving children, youth, and families as a lay professional in the church. Once, several years ago, we beefed up the Advent wreath-making event into an intergenerational Advent Fair. There was an opportunity to meet and learn more about Santa Lucia (St. Lucy) with her wreath of candles on her head, St. Nicholas with his gold coins and oranges tucked into their shoes...and there was also a John the Baptist, dressed in animal skins and looking just a little unshaven and earthy. It was the perfect dad who knew how to get into character. At his learning station, he challenged kids to eat bugs with him since it was said that John ate a diet of locusts and wild honey. I scoured the internet and found a place in Kentucky that placed whole crickets in tiny bricks of chocolate. The kids loved it! The parents were mildly horrified, but some were brave enough to try. In the middle of all the holy commotion in the parish hall, a kindergartener named Riley ran up and grabbed my hand. "Miss Emily, John the Baptism guy is here, and he is REALLY wild. Let's go get wild with him!" Honestly, it's one of the best invitations I have ever received in ministry. "Let's go get wild with him."

I think the gift of John, "the baptism guy" showing up in the Advent readings every year speaks to our need for bold reminder - live a different way... be transformed AGAIN by the coming of Jesus. Consider where our hearts and minds might need to experience the reorienting of crawling our way back to Jesus and knowing just how easy it is to turn our focus to earthly things instead of holy things.

The readings gave us a different poetic hymn to read together. The Song of Zechariah, found in the Gospel of Luke, retells Zechariah's experience with being struck by the power of Christ to come. He was John the Baptizer's father and was made mute for most of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John because of his own disbelief. But once Zechariah got it, he REALLY got it. He knew who his child would become and recognized his son's important role in preparing the way for Jesus. There is a line in the Song of Zechariah that gets me every time.

[We are] 'free to worship Jesus without fear" all the days of our life. We don't need to carry around our fear of this world because Jesus already knows us as Children of God... Siblings of Christ... and our nature is one of holiness and righteousness, and God's love for us is the model of compassion and grace.

In modern therapeutic language, it sounds something like "don't believe half of what we think about ourselves. God knows us better... and knows us as beloved. And yet Jesus will not leave us there. He will call us repeatedly to go deeper, love more, and be the light along with him... to model ourselves in his ways.

This journey toward Godliness isn't always easy. The prophet Malachi offers the image of the refiner's fire. Initially, this last book in the prophetic section of the writings was a strong reminder of how ordained humans should walk in the world. In the post-exile period, our dear friends in the priesthood were getting a little lax in their religious practices and social engagement. God spoke through Malachi (which means "Messenger") to remind them of their responsibility to keep their end of the deal in the Covenant God made with them as God's chosen people, the Israelites.

In more recent times, the church has emphasized the understanding of "the priesthood of all believers" found in 1 Peter so these messages are for us all. Remember God's promises to us... and be thoughtful in how we keep our promises to God. How do we partner with the Love Incarnate who has come down to be with us then, now, and always?

The refiner's fire doesn't burn the whole thing up until it is gone, its fire burns away all the impurities, leaving the precious metal behind. We are the preciousness that remains. And yes, we need a little refining from time to time. The important part is that God sees our beauty, believes in our goodness... and is always calling us back to our truest selves.

So maybe that can be the focus for our conversations with God and one another this week - what might need to be "burned off" in order to refine us... and make us our best selves? What about our words, engagement, and actions make us a little dull? How might we ask God to help us refine those aspects of ourselves?

To have a sense of Metanoia - the changing of heart so Christ can enter. Where is the voice of John echoing in our lives - Pay attention! Live a different way! Prepare the way for the one who is coming...who has, who is, and who will continue to change everything.

And to accept Riley's joyful invitation - "John the Baptim Guy is here. Let's go get wild with him!"

Amen.