

While we can think of Advent
 as a time to await the birth of the Christ Child,
 it is more powerful to think of Advent
 as a time to anticipate the Second Coming of Christ.
 We exist in time
in-between the Nativity and the Parousia.
 Last week we listened to Mark's Apocalypse,
 in which Jesus describes the signs of the end-times.
 Today we hear Second Isaiah promise that
 "the glory of the LORD shall be revealed."
 And John the Baptizer warns
 that the time for repentance is here.
 Advent reminds us of a coming day of judgment
 in anticipation of which we –
 individually and collectively –
 must assess our need for repentance.
 As we hear John prophesy
 "One more powerful than I is coming,"
 I invite us to open our hearts
 to the call for repentance his crowds respond to,
 expecting forgiveness of their sins.
 We have much for which to repent.

As all four Gospels open,
 John is preaching and baptizing
 in the wilderness of Judea, east of Jerusalem.
 According to a different Gospel, Luke,
 it is the year 29 in the reign of Caesar Augustus.
 Some scholars speculate that John
 spent some of his growing-up years
 among the ascetics, perhaps at Qumran,
 where dissident Jews practiced unique observances,
 among them a ritual of daily bathing.
 As it happens, we can verify
 John's baptizing in the River Jordan historically.
 A Jew writing within just a few years of these events,
 Josephus, chronicles the Baptizer
 who was renowned and loved by the people.

Josephus confirms that great crowds
 came to the river to be immersed
 as an outward sign of their inward repentance.
 Coming to a river for baptism
 would have been exotic then for Jewish people.
 Though ritual baths were common practice later,
 they were not performed in rivers
 nor were they administered
 by a designated individual,
 as John has appointed himself in the Jordan.
 God is speaking through John,
 in the manner of the ancient prophets.
 There has been no one like him
 since the prophet Malachi,
 and before that, the prophet Elijah,
 whom John resembles in manner of dress.
 It was said that Elijah would return
 and signal the arrival of the end-times.
Where John is baptizing is loaded with symbolism:
 He is on the very border
 that once separated wilderness wanderings
 from the promised land of milk and honey.
 We can speculate if people saw John's baptism
 as a symbolic re-enactment of their ancestors
 crossing the Jordan into the promised land.
 By drawing crowds to this historic spot,
 the Baptist has fashioned a collective repentance,
 a mass turning to God.
 We can profitably ask,
 Why so much attention in all four Gospels
 to this one character, John, who is obviously
 going to be secondary to the gospel narrative?
 I think Mark, the gospel writer, in particular
 is using John to describe a break-line
 in human history:
 John is the last in a long line of prophets of Israel,
 the fulfillment of promises in the Ancient Covenant.

Specifically, the Gospels portray John as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, “the voice of one crying out.”

That citation of verses from the prophets cuts into today’s passage like a Greek chorus. From earliest times, Israel understood itself to be in a dual relationship with God: subject to God’s judgment, and God’s blessing. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Moses and Miriam, all witnessed God’s judgment and God’s blessing. John’s baptismal setting is one of those thin places where the human and the divine are apt to meet – the most notable being, of course, Moses’ encounter with the Burning Bush in the wilderness. From this opening scene, the gospel unfolds as a drama at the end of one era and the dawn of a new. John the Baptist is the last voice of the old era. Jesus will be the voice of the new.

It always surprises me that John the Baptist attracted huge crowds with the message, “Repent . . . be forgiven.” Yet there is reason to believe, from the New Testament itself, that John enjoyed more popularity than Jesus. Early on, John attracted the attention of the political establishment. Josephus confirms what the gospels tell us: King Herod perceives John a bigger threat to the empire than Jesus. Herod executes John in prison, primarily because John is so popular. Most likely the Jewish religious establishment also resented John’s popularity. Dispensing ritual cleanliness was the province of the Temple and its priests in Jerusalem. The suggestion that his baptism conferred “forgiveness of sins”

would have especially troubled religious authorities, who claimed that only God can forgive sins. John is the non-denominational preacher with the mega-church in the county. And yet, history has been kind to John the Baptist. His appeal transcends time, place, and even religion. Many faiths, including Islam, venerate John the Baptist. What is his enduring appeal? First of all, he is authentic. He eats locusts and honey, according to Matthew and Mark. Second, John is passionate. He has the courage of his convictions. And third, John is wise in the ethic of God. In the other gospels we hear his ethical message of radical generosity, respect for human dignity, fair play when relative power-positions are uneven, and moral rigor especially for the privileged class. These are ethical issues ripped from today’s news. We could use a John the Baptist today. But could even John make us repent of our individualistic, materialistic ways? I wonder. Could John make us recognize that we all live on the edge of disintegration and that we need one another as much as we need God? The American spirit of personal independence, coupled with an inclination to assume our destinies are under our own control, makes us skeptical of reliance on one another. Skepticism is a normal stage of the faith journey. But our skepticism should be directed toward the prevailing culture. Instead, the prevailing culture directs its skepticism toward faith.

One of the reasons our society as a whole devalues a life of faith is because it seldom sees faith lived with intensity and integrity, John's intensity and integrity.

His message today might be heard this way:

Prepare the way: Straighten the crooked paths!

Simplify access to functional healthcare.

Prepare the way: Fill in the low places!

Grant all people basic food, clothing, and shelter.

Prepare the way: Level the high places!

The privileged are due only what they earn.

Prepare the way: Smooth the rough places!

Protect the minority voices in legislating activity.

That's how we live a life worthy of our baptisms.

Let us pause during this Advent season

to assess our need for repentance on the scales of prophetic justice.

Most times we don't give a thought to ethics, because we assume that we are ethical people.

Can we hear Isaiah calling us to the ethical way?

What are the hills that need leveling ?

Where are the valleys that need filling?

When does crookedness need straightening?

How much roughness needs smoothing?

Faith in practice has to do with ethics in all spheres of human endeavor.

To take but one example from today's headlines:

The widening gap wealth disparity.

Even without a tax overhaul,

the wealthiest 20 percent in our nation

control 90% of the assets;

the wealthiest 1 percent control 38 percent.

Can Christians stand idly by when a tax overhaul will actually aggravate

the mal-distribution of wealth?

John the Baptist is shouting,

"The day of God's judgment is near!"

Learn what John means when he preaches,

"Repent!"

John is not asking anyone to wear camel-hair garments or eat wild locusts.

Rather, he is preaching a return

to the communal values of Israel,

the chosen people, united in covenant with God, and therefore with one another.

What John urges us to repent of

is our independence, our self-reliance, our sense of self-sufficiency.

Unity comes not as a blending out of differences but as mutual respect of individual differences.

The ethics John preaches of generosity,

hospitality, and fairness can only be maintained

if we trust in our differences

rather than fear them.

In our baptisms we find our calling.

God assures us when we are baptized

that we are neither too small to matter,

nor too indistinguishable for God to notice.

In our baptisms a divine parent speaks love to us,

proclaiming that we are ones in whom

God takes delight, God's beloved ones.

The masses coming to the Jordan for John's baptism demonstrate the Kingdom of God

in the common weal.

Hordes of people come to the river to be baptized

as a sign of their collective dependence on God.

These people have a common interest:

their collective salvation at the time of judgment.

John gives these people hope.

Damp from the river, they return to daily lives

with a more generous spirit

and a joyous sense of expectation.

The church carries on John's tradition in baptism.

We initiate people into the household of God.

We affirm their renunciation of evil in the world.

We touch them with water,

a sign of spiritual cleansing.

We pledge to provide the baptized
with spiritual care and ethical development.
Such is the church's calling to God's beloved.
Baptism helps us live in the mess of the world
knowing we are the loved of God.
My friends, people of privilege,
heed the call to repentance.
Our first response to John's call is self-examination.
Repentance calls for more than our change of heart,
more than saying we're sorry.
To repent is to act differently in the world.
Repentance is metanoia:
turning our lives to Christ.
There is nothing quiet or subtle –
or even reassuring –
about John's call to repentance.
For some, repenting means loosing
self-imposed limitations, and opening
the imagination to possibilities for change.
For some, repenting means changing a self-view
from "I am worthless," to "I am God's beloved."
We are John's kind of community
here in this church.

As we await the day of Christ's coming again,
let us live with a generous spirit
and a profound sense of expectation.
The Christ did not arrive as even John expected.
Christ will not arrive a *second* time
as anyone expects.

CONCLUSION

I conclude with remarks by my theology professor,
Dr. Lee Barrett, on what John the Baptizer means:
"John links Jesus to God's promises in Israel's past.
"The setting in the wilderness evokes memories
of the preparation of the people of Israel
for entrance into the promised land.
"John, the epitome of the prophets,
also points forward to God's imminent intervention
in human history to confer a new hope to humanity.
"Into the wilderness of our own broken lives,
and our own bleeding world,
erupts the promise of a baptism of new life.
"Poised like John's generation between
a troubled past and an unprecedented future,
our proper response in the present should be
confession, repentance, and hopeful expectation."
Amen.