



## Sermon

Matthew 3:1-12  
Second Sunday of Advent  
December 9, 2007  
Historic St. George's UMC  
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

### Playing John the Baptist

*In those days, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."... all Judea were going out to hear him... But when many Pharisees and Sadducees [came]...he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come...I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me...he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire..."*  
Matthew 3:1-12

In one of the more memorable moments in my preaching life, I dressed, the best way I could, as John the Baptist. I let my beard grow extra bushy, donned a scratchy camel colored tunic, belted it at the waist and mussed my hair. During the congregation's singing the hymn before the sermon I left the chancel, put on this costume and prepared to reenter the church from behind the congregation. As the hymn ended and the people quietly, unsuspectingly, settled in for the sermon, I burst in from the rear. In what I hoped would be a startling John the Baptist rant, I cried out: "You brood of vipers...."

All did not go according to plan. As I entered, the ushers moved to pounce like bouncers on an unwelcome intruder. There were such gasps that every bit of breathable oxygen left the room. And one dear, sweet old lady sitting near where I entered shouted: "Oh my God! Get him."

Note to self: The next time you do this, tell the ushers, turn on the fans and warn the faint of heart.

In all honesty, I enjoyed being John the Baptist. There was something in me that loved doing his job. There was and is something fun about thundering judgment. Talking about the judgment of God may be among our least favorite subjects when we're on the receiving end but there is some pleasure in delivering it. Most days I'd trade

my clerical collar, alb, stole and cross for smelly camel hair, honey-dipped grasshopper and the chance to shout the judgment of the Almighty at some well-deserving schmucks.

There is something satisfying about being the righteous one bearing the fruit of morality and telling sinners to repent. Judgment makes us feel we're right. Being self-righteous (as much as we'll say we're not) makes us feel worthy. The way most of us reckon we are good is by pointing out who's bad.

Announcing judgment is usually easy, especially at this time of year when a little fire and brimstone might be needed to reconnect us to the reason for the season. If the days of Advent towards Christmas, with all the trappings, point us to anything, it is the gap between our inner lives, hopes and wants and our external behavior. Sometime or another in the next thirty days we'll catch ourselves jolly-well smiling our way through holiday routines while inside, we're aching in loneliness, pain, disappointment and wondering if we're good enough.

The thing that makes John the Baptist so on-target is the way he points to these gaps in rhetoric and behavior. He is the voice of the Law, calling a sin a SIN and telling us, in no uncertain terms, we are to live lives that bear the fruit of turning from things that block us from God and turning towards things that enliven us in God.

Turning "from" blockages from God and turning "towards" enlivening ourselves and the world in God is what the Bible's idea of repentance is all about. Nowhere is this repentance thing more needed than in getting honest about how much fun it is to play John the Baptist; about an eagerness to judge rather than redeem. What's Advent and Christmastime without a little griping about all the people who only come to

church on Christmas Sunday or Christmas Eve or bemoaning consumerism, materialism and greed (as if they only existed in December)?

But John the Baptist does a really interesting thing after tongue-lashing the religious leaders of his day. Look and listen carefully – notice that he stops wagging his finger at them. He points away from their sinfulness. Look and listen carefully – notice how he points to the one coming after him. He points beyond prophetic, telling-it-like-it-is preaching to a horizon where a new Son is beginning to rise. “...but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Mt. 3:11)

Here’s how the contemporary translation in Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* puts the same text: “The real action comes next: The main character in this drama – compared to him I’m [John] a mere stagehand – [he] will ignite kingdom life within you, a fire within you, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out.”

Preaching judgment is the easy part. What God is really after, (in the words of traditional biblical translation) is stirring the Holy Spirit. What God is really after (in the more contemporary translation) is igniting kingdom life, a fire within, changing us from inside out. What God is really after in any language, is doing the saving thing for people and the world.

So, John the Baptist points to a God not willing to standby and wag the finger in judgment or toss the unrighteous into some unquenchable fire. The one John the Baptist points to is the God willing to enter the burning chaos and save it. John can only talk passionately about the things that stand in the way. He blusters. He yells. He spits out judgment. The wilderness where he comes from is fine but it is far from the everyday lives of those in Jerusalem or Philadelphia who come streaming to him

Jesus, on the other hand, comes and enters the heart of human life, taking upon himself the things separating people from God. He steps into the gaps; he lives the gaps between inner life and outward behavior. His life’s work ends not in any kind of self-satisfied, “Boy, are you gonna get it,” while rejoicing in the damn sinners getting their

comeuppance. His life’s work takes him to a cross where the power of sin, separation and self-righteousness get turned around to something new. New, like when at the moment he is judged by the cross and those of every stripe who put him there, says: “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they’re doing” and “Today, you will be with me in paradise.” Jesus turns everything around and does something new, like at the end of his never-ending story, on Easter morn, when what “sinners” get is his ongoing life. There could have been judgment. What they get is new life.

I wonder sometimes if we don’t perfect the art of judgment without pointing to the One who really does the judging, who is of course the same One who does the saving.

In a wonderful passage about judgment, Frederick Buechner (*Wishful Thinking*) writes:

The New Testament proclaims that at some unforeseeable time in the future, God will ring down the curtain of history, and there will come a Day on which all our days and all the judgments upon us and all our judgments upon each other will be themselves be judged. The judge will be Christ. In other words, the one who judges most finally will be the one who loves us most fully.

Romantic love is blind to everything except what is loveable and lovely, but Christ’s love sees us with a terrible clarity and sees us whole. Christ’s love so wishes our joy that it is ruthless against everything that diminishes our joy. The worst sentence Love can pass is that we behold the suffering which Love has endured for our sake, and that is our acquittal.

... the one who judges us most finally is the one who loves us most fully...

Do we sometimes so perfect the art of judgment that we fail to point to the One who does the saving? When is the last time you beheld the suffering which Love endures for your sake. That’s where judgment does its thing. That’s how judgment turns repentance into new life (without self-righteousness).

We’re trying to grow our congregation here at St. George’s, to invite people to join us journeying into faith. When I talk to people

who don't go to church, some who say they've given up on the church, one of the things they usually express is the idea that the church is more interested in judgment than amazing grace. The church is busier thinking about sin than releasing the love of God.

Again in Advent, the sound of John the Baptist's raving might sound more like a rant directed at broods of sins, sinners and warning of wrath to come than pointing to One more wonderful and resourceful, even more powerful than any ability to keep God away. It is relentlessly announcing Love's coming again and again and again that inspires us to change and live with a new and different kind of power.

Eugene Peterson's translation again: "The real action comes next: The main character in this drama... will ignite kingdom life within you, a fire within you, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out."

This is where John the Baptist is pointing. This is why Jesus came and comes again.

There is of all things an Easter hymn, sounding in my ear. Wrong season? You be the judge. In Now the Green Blade Riseth,

the words of poet John McCleod Campbell Crum, sung to the tune of a French Christmas Carol say:

When our hearts are weary,  
Grieving or in pain,  
Jesus touch can call us back to life  
again,  
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare  
have been:  
Love is come again, like wheat that  
springeth green.

God of judging love, you yearn for us to turn to you and live. Prepare the way of the Lord. Even when we focus more on sin's power than Love's relentlessly redeeming work, you would burn away our resistance and set us on a journey to Bethlehem. Open our eyes along the way, stir up your spirit in our spirits to see beyond mere judgment, fears, guilt, and hurt, except for the gracious ways those things point us to your longsuffering love and our home with you. Stir up our hearts, O Lord and come.

Amen.

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