11-27-16 Advent 1 Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 3:1-12 Characters of Christmas: John the Baptist

Do you remember the uncertainty of answering the telephone prior to caller ID? When you picked up the phone and said, “Hello” you never knew who was on the other end of the line. Yet remember a time when you did pick it up and you heard somebody say, "Hey! How are you doing?" Instantly you knew exactly who it was and you began to talk where you last left off.

..How did you know who it was? You recognized their voice! There are certain people whose voice we know so well that as soon as we hear their voice on the phone, hear their voice cheering on the team, or even hear their voice in a crowded room we know exactly who it is because we recognize their voice. But in order for us to get to the point where we can recognize someone simply by hearing their voice at least one of two things needs to occur. Either there needs to be something unique about their voice or we need to be very familiar with that person. (Christopher Raiford sermoncentral.com 12-01, adapted)

Today we hear that familiar and unique voice of Advent, John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, “Repent! Change your Life! God’s kingdom is here.” Every Advent, John the Baptist appears, one of the most unique characters of the Christmas season, calling us to repent and be ready.

Yet you will find him in no other place except the church. I cannot imagine him ever portrayed on the front of a Christmas card. I have never heard his message put to song over a store’s loudspeaker. John is just too wild for the traditional celebration of Jesus’ birth. Who wants to see a desert nomad dressed in camel’s hair, eating locusts and wild honey in the midst of a peaceful manger scene? John beside the wise men would be a like a homeless man straight off the street who finds himself in the middle of the glitz and glamour of a performance of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. John is just too wild for the traditional celebration of Jesus’ birth.

Yet every Advent, the church calendar insists that we visit John in the wilderness before we make the trek to Bethlehem to see the newborn king. Every Advent, we must come face to face with John the Baptist and his fiery message, for if we are not ready to hear his message then we are also not ready to receive a newborn king.

John is a familiar voice in Advent, the church season that includes the four weeks leading up to Christmas, four weeks in which we are called to prepare for the coming of Christ. Advent is a time to take a deep breath, pause and ponder if we are really ready to receive Christ into our world and into our lives.

The season of Advent is almost lost today amid a world that starts to sell Christmas ornaments in July and greets the arrival of Santa in mid-November. The world wants to celebrate Christmas from Halloween until December 25th. The church, however, does not want to start the celebration of Christmas until December 24th, choosing instead to move more slowly to the manger. Often I will find myself doing a mix of Advent and Christmas in mid-December.

And yes, invariably I will receive a complaint or two a year when I don’t sing the songs of the Angels or “Joy to the World” the first couple of Sundays in Advent. Instead we sing “Prepare the Way of the Lord” and “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus” songs that long for Christ’s coming rather than celebrate his birth.

Advent is not very Christmas-y. It often begins with a word of warning about Christ’s second coming, and then the voice of the wild man in the desert calling us to repentance. This Advent we will contemplate not only John’s life and message, but also the life and message of his father, Zechariah. They help us to ponder the deeper meaning of Advent, and of Christmas—are we ready for the coming of Christ?

In order to understand his call to be ready, we first need to understand who is this character of Christmas called John the Baptist.

John was born as a miracle child to Zechariah and Elizabeth, a Temple priest and a relative of Mary. We are introduced to John when he leaps in his mother’s womb as she greets Mary prior to Jesus’ birth. So John is a relative and contemporary of Jesus.

John knew that he was set apart for a specific ministry, as a forerunner to the Messiah. He was a popular prophet for his day and age, gathering disciples who also called others to a baptism of repentance. Our Scripture today calls John the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, the voice in the wilderness crying out prepare the way for the Lord.

Yes, he was a bit of a wild man, at least according to our standards. Clothes of camel’s hair and a leather belt. A diet of locusts and wild honey. A life in the desert wilderness rather than the holy city. Yet all was intentional as he focused on his mission.

We do not know how much John and Jesus knew each other as they grew up, or even whether or not John fully believed that Jesus was the Messiah. John began his mission prior to Jesus, yet recognized his relative when Jesus came to be baptized at the beginning of his ministry. John was popular with the masses, drawing people from Jerusalem, Judea, and Jordan. He was blunt not only with the local peasants but also with the learned leaders.

His bluntness later got him in trouble, as he was arrested by Herod Antipas after speaking out against Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife and finally beheaded when Herod was tricked by his wife into killing John.

A prophet’s life is never an easy life. Yet their messages are timeless. Such is the case for John the Baptist today. John’s call is a call to repent and be ready for the coming of Christ. It is a call that includes a changed heart, a changed life, and a life that bears good fruit.

As the forerunner to the Messiah, John’s message of a changed heart was a wake-up call to the Jews to prepare for the coming of God’s chosen one to earth. Like the ancient prophets of Israel, John did not mince words when he reminded the Israelites of God’s faithfulness and encouraged them to renew their relationships with God by turning back to a life following God’s ways of living.

“Repent! Change your Life! God’s kingdom is here.”

John is saying to the people of God:

“Emmanuel may not come today, but will be coming soon. Are you ready? You better get ready. Now—not tomorrow or sometime in the distant future, but now—now is the time for you to repent and get your life back on track. In that way you will be ready.”

John called the Israelite people to confess their sins and be baptized as a sign of their repentance, as a symbol that they had changed the direction of their lives from the ways of the world back to the ways of God. Only through repentance, John proclaimed, would the Jews be ready to welcome the Messiah and usher in God’s kingdom ways.

Pastor Don Schultz proclaims:

..Of all the Christmas decorations, this one is the most important one of them all – an attitude of repentance. It’s invisible because it’s a change that takes place inside of you, a big change. That’s what John was illustrating with his lifestyle. He didn’t wear Tommy Hilfiger, he wore camel’s hair – the same clothes that the poor of the day would wear. His leather belt was considered as something cheap. His grasshopper and honey diet was the diet of the poor and underprivileged. He lived in the open desert, instead of in a nice condo. Do you see the point John was making with his life? “What I’m doing on the outside, I want you to do on the inside – get rid of your love for things, your materialism. Get rid of your pride. Be someone who is humble, someone who is focused on spiritual things, someone who is focused on worshiping God and serving others.”

(Don Schultz 12-01 sermoncentral.com)

What John did on the outside, we are called to do on the inside- confess our sins and turn back to God.

Today, John is calling us to accept the responsibility of our own actions and to ask forgiveness from God and others for the ways in which we have allowed sin to control our emotions and attitudes and actions. I am not talking here just about the “big sins” but about any wrongdoing or shortcoming that has separated us from God or other people.

“Repent! Change your Life! God’s kingdom is here.”

Today, John calls us not only to a changed heart, but also to a changed life. When we change on the inside it will transform not only how we think but also how we act. Another name for this repentance, this turnaround, is metanoia. Metanoia is a complete change of heart, of will, of mind. Metanoia is a complete change in why and how we do things. We turn from our sin to right living. We turn from our selfishness to obedience to God. We turn from following the world’s ways to following God’s ways.

Metanoia begins with naming and confessing our sins. We recognize and feel sorry for what we have done wrong or failed to do. We recognize and confess our part of injustice, oppression, gossip and sexism. We recognize and confess where we have been paralyzed by fear from living or speaking our faith in Christ.

After we name and confess our sins, we then make a life-change, not only acknowledging and asking forgiveness for what we have done wrong, but also changing our behaviors. Metanoia is a turning away from what we have done wrong and a turning toward another way of living.

An example of metanoia is found in Charles Dicken's classic story "A Christmas Carol." Scrooge is a mean old miser who does not like to help anyone but himself. His response to "Merry Christmas" is "Bah humbug." He never acts to help others, but acts only when he can benefit himself. Yet as the story goes on and Scrooge is visited by the ghosts of Christmases past, present, and future, he begins to see his actions for what they are- cruel and stingy. As he sees his actions in their true light, Scrooge begins to experience metanoia, a complete change of character, of will, of spirit. By the end of the story, Scrooge is the man giving money, presents, food, and warm wishes to everyone. His attitudes, his actions, and his spirit have all changed, from stinginess to sharing, from thinking only of himself to thinking first of others. What Scrooge experienced was metanoia, a dramatic life change, a complete turnaround, and that metanoia is what John the Baptist is calling us to do today.

We are called to change. To be open. To be ready for God’s arrival in our lives. To smooth out the rough roads and get rid of the obstacles that keep us from Jesus.

Max Lucado tells the story of a man who had been a closet slob most of his life. He just couldn't comprehend the logic of neatness. Why make up a bed if you're going to sleep in it again tonight? Why put the lid on the toothpaste tube if you're going to take it off again in the morning? The man admitted to being compulsive about being messy.  
Then he got married. His wife was patient. She said she didn't mind his habits ... if he didn't mind sleeping on the couch. Since he did mind, he began to change. He said he enrolled in a 12-step program for slobs. A physical therapist helped him rediscover the muscles used for hanging up shirts and placing toilet paper on the holder. His nose was reintroduced to the smell of Pine Sol. By the time his in-laws arrived for a visit, he was a new man.  
But then came the moment of truth. His wife went out of town for a week. At first he reverted to the old man. He figured he could be a slob for six days and clean on the seventh. But something strange happened. He could no longer relax with dirty dishes in the sink or towels flung around the bathroom or clothes on the floor or sheets piled up like a mountain on the bed.

What happened? Simple. He had been exposed to a higher standard of living. That's what Jesus does.  
 --Max Lucado, In the Grip of Grace p.116-117. Homiletics 12-7-97

Each Advent when we hear the cry of John the Baptist, we are called to a higher standard of living, called to God’s standard of living, called to change our lives from selfishness to faithfulness in order to be open to Christ and Christ’s message of forgiveness, peace and new life.

C S Lewis once said:

"... this repentance ... is not something God demands of you before he will take you back and which he could let you off if he chose: it is simply a description of what going back to him is like." We cannot be right with God without repentance; it's like asking God to take us back without actually going back.

--“John the Outlier” 12-9-12 homileticsonline.com

This life-change, this metanoia, this turnaround is not often easy, but it is the way that God calls us to live.

Many years ago the head of the NAACP and the Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan began to debate one another. The Klansman taunted the black man and called him names. The black man responded that nothing the Klansman could do would make him hate him. He responded instead with love. Over a period of many years, the Klansman would call the black man and say, “Hello, nigger.” But in 1991, he called and said, “Hello, brother.” He went on to tell his friend that he had left the Klan, had accepted Christ, and was called to preach the gospel, and that his conversion was due to the example of the black man returning hatred with love. Later, they shared a pulpit and together preached God’s love. Now that’s repentance; that is life change.  
 --Robert M. Bowman, “A call to repentance,” December 20-21, 1997,

United Catholic Church Home page, Homiletics 12-14-03, adapted

Several years ago one of my aunts, who have all been teachers, shared the story of a former student who was the class troublemaker, the one who was always getting in trouble for not doing his homework, not paying attention, and not acting appropriately towards the other students in the class. This student constantly challenged his teachers, and many teachers gave up on him as a hopeless case. Yet when my aunt ran into this student years later, he had experienced a complete turnaround in his life, and was now a successful businessman and husband. When he was in his twenties someone had invited him to church, and that one invitation began his experience of metanoia, his turning back to God and his transformation in all areas of his life.

This call of John was and is not only for sinners, but also for the religious, for those both outside and inside the church. Back then, sinners traveled over 20 miles from Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside to see, hear and respond to John’s message from God. The Pharisees and Sadducees and other religious leaders also came out to John because it was the thing to do and they wanted to be seen as those who listened to God’s voice. Some of them were sincere, I am sure, but many were more curious or disturbed that John was messing with their tradition.

For the religious leaders who came just for show or out of curiosity, John had some harsh words for them—John called them snakes, told them their heritage meant nothing, and told them not to be baptized just for show.

Essentially John was saying to the religious leaders them and now: don’t just appear to believe, don’t just show up for worship today yet not live a godly life the rest of the week. No matter who you are—sinner, church leader, pastor alike—all are called to repent, all are called to get right with God, to prepare for the gift of God’s love offered through Jesus.

True repentance is recognized in the fruits we bear. True repentance is seen in our character and conduct and appearance and integrity. When our lives do not show the turn around of repentance, then we will not bear the good fruit of Christian discipleship. John knows the truth and power and new life found through repentance. When repentance is done only for show, he is harsh on those who claim to believe only because it looks good.

What counts are our lives, and what fruit we bear for Christ. As we wait in checkout lines this holiday season, can others see Christ in our cheerful patience? As we attend parties and get-togethers and concerts, can others see Christ in our attitudes and actions? As we interact with family members and friends, do they experience Christ’s love and joy and forgiveness through our daily actions? What does our conduct and appearance say about Christ this holiday season—that he is Lord of our lives, or an afterthought to the celebrations?

Every Advent, we must come face to face with John the Baptist and his fiery message- “Repent! Change your Life! God’s kingdom is here.” He calls us to bear good fruit that shows that we indeed have repented, have turned from sin, have changed our hearts and changed our lives. How is this fruit evident in your life?

Every Advent we must visit John in the wilderness before we make the trek to Bethlehem to see the newborn king. How are you heeding his call to repent and be ready for the coming of Christ—at the manger, in your life today, and someday at his second coming?

“Repent! Change your Life! God’s kingdom is here.”

May we listen and learn today from John the Baptist.

May we respond and be ready for the coming of Christ.

May it be so.

Let us pray.