

“So You Think John Can Preach?”

Matthew 3: 1-12

Prayer: Let your spirit of wisdom flow through us and guide us, O God of peace, as we listen to your voice in the wilderness. Amen.

A Worship Committee of a very conflicted congregation met one night discussing who to invite as guest preacher on one of the Advent Sundays when the minister was sick. One member said, “Let us invite someone like Billy Graham. I would like to hear him preach a simple, direct message of sin and salvation that we long to hear because the world has gone mad!” A female member stood up and said, “I vote for someone like Barbara Brown Taylor. We need to listen to her lived experience. A sermon that welcomes us in, challenges our views of the world, and most importantly, delivers good news.” “I totally disagree with both of your suggestions,” said one member. “Why don’t we invite a young radical activist like Shane Claiborne who will remind us of our responsibility on climate change, poverty and homelessness?” Then an older member of the committee stood up and said, “What we need to invite is someone like John the Baptist. We need to hear a sermon on repentance and what brood of vipers we have become!” Everyone looked at each other and there was a dead silence.

On this second Sunday of Advent, we have come to listen to John the Baptist - one who is the “front man”, the forerunner of Jesus, who, with his outspoken and rash behaviour, prepares the people for Jesus’ arrival. Walter Brueggemann calls him the “checkpoint” and declares that one cannot get to Jesus on Christmas without passing through him. Mark calls him the Baptizer, Luke calls him “John, son of Zechariah.” And Matthew calls him the Baptist. We meet him at this time of the year and we somehow can never get rid of him. Imagine for a moment if he was at your party! His outrageous outfit of smelly camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist would not blend in very well with red silk or tuxedos – or any designer’s clothing. His hair is unkempt and his beard long and straggly. You would also have difficulty cooking his favourite recipe: locusts drizzled with wild honey! And what a downer if he starts mingling with people and calling them a brood of vipers! John Shelby Spong, author of *Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy* indicates that Mark, the original gospel writer, copied both by Matthew and Luke, identifies John the Baptist as the new Elijah, preparing the way for the

Messiah's coming. John was clothed the same way as Elijah in the book of 2nd Kings, "wearing a garment of hair with a leather girdle around his waist." Mark also located John the Baptist in the wilderness out of which Elijah had emerged eating a diet of locusts and honey.

Like the prophet Elijah, John was fearless, denouncing sinfulness and acts of injustice wherever he found them. With John's emergence from the wilderness, the sound of the prophetic voice was again heard in the land. And this wildman prophet trots into our worship service today who preaches us an Advent of repentance. Are we ready to listen to him? From the wilderness, John cries out to us: "Prepare the way of the Lord! Get ready for God's arrival! Repent!" He was like a thundering voice. He called for repentance for the forgiveness of sins - difficult words to ponder in this time of Advent. We usually take the word "repentance" to mean that we are "sorry" for bad things we've done with the promise to stop doing them. Repentance invokes a sense of guilt, of not doing enough, of not measuring up. But repentance is more serious than that. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*. This involves a radical change of direction in life. To repent means to alter the course of your entire life. A theologian once said that "*Repentance doesn't mean to feel bad, but to think differently... It consists of both outward acts and an inward disposition. When you repent, you turn around, change directions, choose a different path, and make a radical transformation.*" It's not just all in your head. It's a fully embodied makeover.

Let's be honest here. Most of us do not want to hear "fire and brimstone" preachers who talk about the wrath of God coming down on unrepentant sinners. But here is John with his tongue-lashing words, scolding people for their wrongdoings, calling them to change their lives and to come back to God. He saw the pious people – the religious ones who put their faith in their sleeves and called them "brood of vipers." Eugene Peterson's translation in *The Message* gives us a better understanding of John's sermon: "*Brood of snakes! What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God's judgment? It's your life that must change, not your skin. And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as 'father.'* Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there; children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants.

What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire."

John calls his listeners then and now to bear fruits worthy of repentance! The dark world of John is not too far from our world today. The present world, like in John's and Jesus' time, is in great distress. The crooked path is choked with consumerism and materialism. The rocky valleys are groaning with the cries of those whose human rights are violated,. The mountains of power are the stronghold of leaders whose priorities are questionable. The unlevelled road is screaming from the cries of those who live in poverty, the homeless, or those who were denied access to resources because of their gender, class, or ethnicity. The highway is barricaded with armaments and weapons of war and destruction. The muddy plains are filled with refugees - children, women, and men fleeing their homeland and seeking refuge from countries of wealth. The earth, too, is groaning in pain. We sacrifice animals, plants, soil, water, and air for the sake of those who wield the most power. God's voice through John calls us to repent! To repent of the things that betray holiness and the love of God. To repent of words and actions which hurt our neighbours, strangers, our loved ones and ourselves. To repent of plundering and destroying Mother earth. We need to repent of our individual and systemic sins – all those that alienate us from God, from others, from ourselves and the whole of creation.

This past Tuesday in our Lectionary discussion, Jan Pound drew our attention to a Broadview article written by UCC Moderator Carmen Landsdowne in the December issue. She expounded on verse 8 of our reading today by citing instances where we are not bearing fruit worthy of repentance. She said and I quote: *"In the UCC, we say that we want a guaranteed livable wage, that we want to practice reconciliation in action and that we want to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. And yet we are so often confronted by the person living in poverty, the Indigenous person, the climate change activist who says we are not even doing the bare minimum. We are not bearing fruit worthy of repentance. We are relying on our lineage as a church focused on social justice to preach what we believe – and yet when faced with hard everyday choices, we are not bearing fruit worthy of repentance... When we say we want reconciliation, but then don't hold our employers and governments accountable for that meaningful action, we are not bearing fruit worthy of repentance."* John's words of repentance

do not simply call us to be waiting patiently in silence or busying ourselves with pointless preparations, but rather, they call us to action.

Friends, this is hard work! Who is going to buy into this kind of preparation? Is this the yearning of Advent? How do you bear fruit worthy of repentance? It doesn't mean you have to quit your job and become a missionary to far-flung areas. You don't have to sell your property or empty your bank account and give everything to the poor. John says we need to repent of the things we do which betray holiness and the love of God; the things we do which hurt our neighbours, particularly the vulnerable; the ways we hurt ourselves over and over again. Repent from the painful violence that rips apart communities. Repent from the subtler violence of poverty and homelessness and the ways we damage our earth. We repent and turn toward LOVE so we may find life in its fullness. I find comfort in the words of Richard Cardinal Cushing when he said: *"If all the sleeping folks will wake up, and all the lukewarm folks will fire up, and all the disgruntled folks will sweeten up, and all the discouraged folks will cheer up, and all the depressed folks will look up, and all the estranged folks will make up, and all the gossiping folks will shut up, and all the dry bones will shake up, and all the church members will pray up, . . . then we can have the greatest renewal this world has ever known."*

Friends, whether we want to listen to John's sermon or not, repentance is something that we should aim for in Advent. John's invitation is a call to root ourselves in truth and love rather than false pride. Because when we truly repent, the truth emerges and our self-deception ends. So, you think John can preach? I dare say, YES! Let us listen to him and heed his Advent challenge. Thanks be to God. Amen.
