

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

At first glance, last week's start to our Advent season seemed to be a bit threatening. From the Gospel of Matthew we heard:

<sup>40</sup> Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>41</sup> Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>42</sup> Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

<sup>44</sup> Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

This alarming testimony from Jesus last week seems to get amplified from John the Baptist this week and it doesn't seem to get much better either, we hear today:

<sup>2</sup> "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

<sup>8</sup> Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

<sup>10</sup> Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Now let's all join our voices together and sing a rousing chorus of:

Joyful, joyful we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love!

But if we want to keep our singing in tune with the season, perhaps we can sing:

Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive its King;

At first glance, once again as it does every year, it just seems as if Advent starts out very dark and dismal...some could conclude that it's not very inspiring at all. Ahh, but this is that sheer beauty of Advent.

Have you ever looked at a picture of yourself and grumbled about the way you look or have ever heard your voice on tape and said, "I sound like that?" If you are sensing what I am saying then I say to you, welcome to Advent because it is a season of anticipation and beginning, not just for the liturgical year, but it is a season that calls us and challenges us to look honestly within ourselves, despite how we see or hear ourselves, but to look honestly and rethink or anticipate a new beginning within ourselves and in our faith and how we manifest our faith in the darkness of this world.

The season begins in the darkness, a darkness that can be metaphorically defined in many different ways within ourselves. But for today, as threatening as these passages can lead our voices to cry out from our many and various types of wildernesses we experience in our lives, there is Good News. And I believe that the light that breaks that darkness within ourselves only gets better and brighter the deeper we go into the season.

What season of Advent would be complete without John the Baptist in the wilderness? Today we finally get one of the most peculiar characters in the Bible dressed in camel hair and eating bugs. And we get John this way on the Second Sunday of Advent every lectionary year. This is Year A in that three-year cycle which finds us in the Gospel of Matthew. In this Gospel there is a lack of background on John, he seems to appear abruptly from out of nowhere.

But here is an aside about John that I learned some time ago from a little boy about ten years old during a children's sermon on this text. Some of you have heard about this brilliant little boy but for those who haven't let me share it now. In a children's sermon I was telling the kids about a man sent from God who lives in the wilderness all by himself. Out there in the wilderness he wears camel hair and has a leather belt around his waist. Now out in the wilderness there is nothing but bugs and creepy crawlies around him. So guys, I asked, what do you suppose is the only thing that John can eat? Thinking they might conclude the only thing John could possibly eat would be the bugs and creepy crawlies, this dear little boy spoke up and said, he's probably eating the camel he is wearing. Michael quickly ended the kid's sermon and rewrote Holy Scripture with pure logic.

While John the Baptist may be considered one of the most peculiar figures in the Bible, he is someone who stands without compromise, he is unapologetic, and I'm sure in today's culture John would be considered by some very annoying, politically incorrect, and uncouth. John is not swayed by the royalty that will eventually execute him, nor was he swayed by the temple leaders such as the Pharisees and Sadducees...they're all a brood of vipers to John and this seems to be represented in the camel hair he wears, or as Michael points out, the camel he eats.

The camel is a somewhat peculiar and unique animal just like John himself. A camel, according to the Jews, is counted as neither clean nor unclean...it occupies a middle position and partakes characteristics of both sides of the cleanliness ritual. It has a split hoof, but it also chews its cud which is proper to the clean animal. And like John who stands in the middle of what was and what is to come, John leads people to participate in a religious ritual he is calling a Baptism of repentance, this Baptism he is administering has roots in the Jewish tradition.<sup>1</sup>

Because John is preaching about the one who is more powerful and is coming, John stands in conflict with the temple government we know as the Pharisees and Sadducees. John also stands outside of the characterization or the classification of the culture in the wilderness voicing exultations that are not so joyous but are threatening and frightening. Nonetheless, John's popularity was growing along with the zeal of his disciples, but we hear in the Gospel of John how John the Baptist handled this popularity when his disciples approached him concerning Jesus baptizing. St. John says this in his Gospel:

<sup>26</sup>They (his disciples) came to John and said to him, 'Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.' <sup>27</sup>John answered, 'No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. <sup>28</sup>You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, "I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him." <sup>29</sup>He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the

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<sup>1</sup> Joel C. Elowsky, Editor, Thomas C. Oden, General Editor. *Ancient Christian Commentary of Scripture, New Testament IVb, John 11-21*. Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2007. Commentary on Matthew 3:1-6, John the Baptist Prepares the Way, Why Camel Hair? Theodore of Mopsuestia, page 41.

bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. <sup>30</sup> He must increase, but I must decrease.'<sup>2</sup>(John 3:26-30)

No matter how deprecating John is to himself or to others or to the royalty or the temple, he states his case without compromise, unafraid of alarming his hearers and filling them with anxiety. Even today his words can be alarming as we settle into a new Liturgical Year, or one could say John's words this morning can be as annoying as that alarm clock that awakens us in the morning. But if you read the first three chapters of Matthew, John himself seems to appear like the sound of the alarm clock in the morning, very abruptly. Matthew opens his Gospel with the genealogy and birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph running away from Herod, the three of them returning to the district of Galilee to a town called Nazareth, and then all of the sudden in chapter three, "In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea." No lead up, no foreshadowing, not even a clue, just this abrupt appearance of John in the wilderness. This sudden appearance of John is done intentionally. The action of God in history is often sudden, unexpected, and, to our eyes even intrusive. The will of God at times is not gentle or announced, it cannot be equated or understood on our human terms.

Like it or not, our understanding of God and about God is what God reveals to us. God's will violates the categories, it shatters the molds and breaks in on the world as a jarring surprise or an intrusive street preacher dressed in camel hair and in need of a bath and a decent meal, and God's will can even leave us separated from an elegant society and be viewed as strange, unforeseen, intrusive, and unpredictable.

So here today John is calling to us all, not with a cheery gentle voice, "Good morning, the Lord be with you...how are you all doing this morning?" John is calling rather abruptly:

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

<sup>8</sup> Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

<sup>10</sup> Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees;

every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

And we cry out fearfully in response to this by saying, how can I prepare the way? How can I make the Lord's paths straight? What fruit can I bear that is worthy? We ask the right questions, but sadly *we answer these questions* by pointing to the darkness of our culture that is taking place out there! They are to blame out there, so, I will lend my voice to John's and harshly and legalistically proclaim, prepare the way for the Lord, the ax is laying at the root, you will be cut down and thrown into the unquenchable fire, so you better make your paths straight for the Lord, bear fruit worthy of repentance you brood of vipers. But here is the thing to recognize in this passage, John is not crying out to them...he's proclaiming to me, to you, and to all of us...we are the Pharisees and the Sadducees as we sit comfortably in our temples, set in our ways, set in our understandings about faith, we are the brood of vipers. John is calling us from the comforts of our faith...calling us to come out to a newness of faith that may seem like a wilderness for us, to recognize our faith anew as we begin a new year with our faith safely protected in our temples and John is doing it in a very uncomfortable way, without compromise, and unafraid of alarming or

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<sup>2</sup> Some interpreters hold that the quotation continues to the end of verse 36

unsettling us. But notice too that John does not dwell on the ax or the tree that is cut down and thrown into the fire, or even the wrath to come. John moves quickly to the remission of sins, the removal of punishment by moving quickly to Baptism.

It is in these waters of Baptism that the winnowing fork of Jesus Christ separates the wheat and the chaff. In the waters of our Baptism, we are separated from the chaff of sin that encases the gain of our very soul. Luther reminds us in the fourth part of the Large Catechism concerning Baptism:

Thus, we must regard baptism and put it to use in such a way that we may draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and say: “But I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body.”

No greater jewel, therefore, can adorn our body and soul than baptism, for through it we become completely holy and blessed, which no other kind of life and no work on earth can acquire.<sup>3</sup>

Advent may be the title of our Liturgical Season, but it occurs within us and not just out here. As we have lit another candle on this Advent wreath, may this light of peace be the light that breaks the darkness and soothes the unrest within ourselves and may we see that it only gets better and brighter the closer we get to the birth of the One true light of grace and salvation that is Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>3</sup> Kolb, Robert ; Wengert, Timothy J. ; Arand, Charles P.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, the Large Catechism, Fourth Part: Concerning Baptism, page 462, par. 45-46.