



“What are you waiting for?”
A Wilderness Voice”



Luke 3:1-14

December 5, 2021

John the Baptist. He enters our Christmas preparations like a bull in an ornament shop. No time for tact. No patience for pleasantries. John did not send Christmas cards. Into the stillness of silent nights and the beauty of candlelight, he sounds an abrupt and dissonant tone. Merry Christmas, you brood of vipers! On this second Sunday in the season of Advent in the year 2021, we might ask ourselves, “What is *he* doing *here*? Can we not focus on comfort and joy without reminders of wrath and judgment?”

The answer is no, at least not if we want to receive what we’ve been waiting for. As the great preacher Fred Craddock said years ago, “You can get to Bethlehem without going through the desert... but if you do, you won’t find Jesus there.”ⁱ

The road to Christmas goes straight through the wilderness, where this wild-eyed prophet preaches a practical message that demands righteous action, not just the right words. What John the Baptist requires of us is not warm feelings or good intentions, but faithful living. He calls us to change.

On the banks of the Jordan, he appears like a throwback to the Old Testament, borrowing the look and the words of Isaiah and Malachi from generations past. “Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.” This is John’s stated mission, his vocation, his life’s objective, and the way he goes about it is textbook Hebrew prophet. Most public speaking teachers will encourage students to begin with flattery, perhaps tell a joke or ease the listeners in with flowery compliments. Not so with John. His opening line catches our attention

in another way. “Who warned you snakes to flee from God’s coming wrath?”

And here is the detail, the moment, the description that stops me every time I read this story: Crowds of people convene in the wilderness to hear his words, to receive his baptism. John does not advertise, publicize, or evangelize. He certainly does not send out cute invitations with glitter sprinkled inside. And yet, from all over the region, Luke says, people flock to hear his hard-hitting message of necessary change. Why do they do it? Why do they come?

I believe they come because they know, deep in their bones, that John is speaking the truth. I believe they come because they know that sufficiency and the status quo are lies providing a false sense of temporary comfort. I believe they come because they sense the need for something different in their own lives and in the world.

I believe they come because John’s message, sharp as it is, touches a nerve deadened by the passive acceptance of a world gone terribly wrong and nothing we can do about it. His words are a wake-up call.

And so they come. And so they hear John’s message, and so they are transformed by it, baptized, converted, fundamentally changed.

John the Baptist. I think we need his wilderness voice calling us to start all over. There is something about all of us that resists change. Even positive change is filled with stress and anxiety, all rooted in the fear of uncertainty. You may remember the story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. Almost as

soon as they had been liberated from the oppressive regime of Pharaoh, miraculously passed through the heart of the Red Sea parted, and escaped Egypt, God's people begin to long for the certainty of captivity over the unpredictability of liberty. Better the devil you know. Change is hard, and fear of change is built right in to we human creatures. I have engraved in my memory the look in our son Ben's eyes just before he took his very first steps. In his face, I remember a mix of wonder and worry, pride and panic, a desire to let go of my hand and be free of constraints and a fear of falling flat on his face. And I think if you consider the last major change in your life, I'd be willing to bet you'll remember that same tension: A desire for freedom and a fear of falling flat on your face.

No wonder there is a whole industry devoted to the business of change management. We all know that to grow is to change, and we all resist the change that growth requires.

John's voice calls to us from the wilderness; it is the place of least pretension and greatest honesty. We find it in the vulnerability of grief and loss, in the power of human love. We find it in worship. The wilderness is any place where we can say without the padding of protective piety, "I need to change."

So much of our lives works against admitting this truth. We cover our weaknesses, we edit our photos, we paint over our imperfections, we resist the truth that life is messy, that we are broken, in this season and in every season. Relationships are complicated. Getting through the day with our heart and mind intact is a constant challenge. We make mistakes. We break promises. We wound those who are closest to us, and we fail to love our enemies. We—all of us—participate in and are part of so many broken and sinful systems. Life is messy, and no amount of tinsel or bright lights can cover that truth.

So we are invited into the wilderness with John the Baptist, a place where we can acknowledge the pain we cause and the hurt we carry, where we can admit that this season holds as much grief as joy for many

of us. And then, having faced the truth, we can seek to do something about it. Because, you see, John the Baptist's message does not just counsel confession. It requires repentance.

In Hebrew, the word means "to turn." In Greek it means "to change." To repent is to turn around and face the right way, to change your life in some meaningful way. To repent means to stop refusing to be whom God created you to be. So, this Advent, I wonder where you might need to turn around. I wonder which parts of your life might need the words of John the Baptist, who says, "Examine your life with unflinching honesty. Acknowledge the brokenness. You need a Savior." *And, that's good news.*

Does anyone know what it feels like to reach the end of your rope? Maybe you are there now. "I can't keep living this way. I can't go on unless something is different." And then there is the journey we all share—our collective and communal life. So deeply and painfully divided are we. Entrenched, incompatible perspectives passionately held with little or no commitment to common dialogue. Acts of violence and injustice. Hopelessness and fear. Surely all of us know this week that something needs to change—something that is more permanent than Santa hats and presents under the tree, something more genuine than painted smiles and forced merriment.

John the Baptist is a voice, a prophetic voice crying out in the wilderness, and he has some very specific suggestions for us. Bear fruit worthy of repentance. That is, if your heart is changed, your life must show it. For John, it is not enough that we experience joy and beauty in God's presence and feel good and warm about it. The change must be lived if it is real.

Drawn in by this jarring message, the crowds ask John the question he's been waiting for. "What then should we do?" *What should we do?* Like us, they know something is out of alignment. And here I give our faith ancestors a great deal of credit. They do not point fingers. They look in the mirror. "John, what should we do?"

Friends, what we're missing is peace. What John offers, in his own unique and cantankerous way, is the peace we crave. It is not tranquility or stillness. Not greeting card scenes. John the Baptist is the messenger of a deeper peace. Shalom. Wholeness. The crowds converge in the wilderness. We know we lack peace. What then should we do?

John's suggestions are radical in their simplicity.

*Do you have two coats hanging in your closet?
Then give one to a neighbor who has none.*

*Do you have more food than you need?
Then share some with the hungry.*

*Be honest in your interactions with others.
Live with integrity in your professional and
personal lives.*

The message is this: We will never find lasting peace so long as our neighbors suffer. Our wholeness is entirely dependent on the wholeness of our neighbors. We will not have peace so long as some live in fear for their lives. We will not have peace while violence reigns on our streets and in our schools. We will not have peace while some lack the basic necessities of nutrition, warmth, shelter, or hope. Peace will elude us so long as we insist on ignoring the needs of neighbors while tending to our own. Did you notice how this chapter begins? We have this list of all the leaders at the time of John the Baptist, the emperors and governors, the chief priests. John shifts our vision from the powerful whose names begin the chapter to the people in our literal midst who are suffering. His voice cries out, "They are yours because they, too, are God's beloved." John tells us the truth. If you want to prepare the way for Jesus, you must love as he loves. A friend and mentor here at Second often repeats his favorite quote, the words of Mother Teresa: "If we have no peace in the world, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."ⁱⁱ John insists that we

remember that truth, that we belong to each other. He insists that remembering and responding is the only path to true peace.

I'm not sure what those crowds in the wilderness wanted from John the Baptist. I'm not sure what they came seeking. I don't know what they thought they were waiting for. But I do know that once they got there, their lives were changed that day by the call to repent and live the gospel. I do know that *our* lives can be transformed by the repentance that Advent demands. I love the way Mark Doty describes it in his poem, *Messiah*. He writes:

Aren't we enlarged
by the scale of what we're able
to desire? Everything,
the choir insists,

might flame;
inside these wrappings
burns another, brighter life,
quicken, now,

by song: hear how
it cascades, in overlapping,
lapidary waves of praise? Still time.
Still time to change.ⁱⁱⁱ

It's the wilderness voice we didn't know we needed, didn't realize we'd been waiting for all along. It says this: There is still time. Still time to change. Still time to repent. Still time to do it differently this year. Still time to find peace. Still time to share it. Still time.

ⁱ Fred Craddock, *Have You Heard John Preach?* The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock (2011)

ⁱⁱ Mother Teresa, *Mother Teresa Reflects on Working Toward Peace*, <https://www.scu.edu/mcae/architects-of-peace/Teresa/essay.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark Doty, *Messiah (Christmas Portions)*, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173406>