

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
December 5, 2009 – Second Sunday of Advent

Preparing the Way
Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

It's striking that, while only Matthew and Luke open with stories about Jesus' birth, all four Gospels begin the story of Jesus' ministry by mentioning John the Baptist. The good news begins with John. So every Advent, we have to go by John the Baptist to get to Jesus. That's not easy. Although John was a powerful, charismatic preacher, he was more than a little eccentric. He never, and I mean *never*, cut his hair or beard (because he was a Nazarite); his dress code was what you might call "alternative" – camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist. And he ate unusual organic food – I doubt anyone ever accepted his invitation to join him for lunch. "Locusts with honey, did you say? Uh, I'll take a rain check on that, John." Like a handful of other strange guys known to us as Old Testament prophets, John's probably not the kind of man you'd want your daughter to marry.

As Tom Long notes, "As the door to a new era swings open, John the Baptist is the ideal hinge. He is dressed like the old age, but he points to the new. His preaching style is vintage Old Israel; his message paves the way for the New Israel. He appears to have wandered out of some retirement

home for old prophets, but he announces the arrival of one who is even greater than the prophets. He baptizes with the water of the ancient Jordan River; he promises the coming of one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Everything is about to change. The old is passing away; the new presses in. The long, lost night of hopelessness is coming to an end, and John the Baptist is the rooster who awakens the sleeping world with dawn's excited cry."¹

John never shied away from his main message: repent! The kingdom of heaven has come near. He called respectable religious leaders a bunch of snakes and told them to bear fruit worthy of repentance. His job was to prepare for the Advent of Christ, which he did, but in the process, he was pretty harsh! Try as we might, the Gospel writers will not let us avoid him. He's God's messenger, sent to prepare the way of the Lord. And his message is that the Lord is not coming to host a tea party with crumpets and raspberry jam. He's coming to judge the world.

I don't know anyone who looks forward to judgment, do you? It can be a bit frightening. John uses strong images – The winnowing fork is in his

¹ Tom Long, Matthew, p. 25.

hand. The wheat will be gathered into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. So repent!

Fred Craddock says that those images are indeed scary, but what's really frightening about listening to John preach "is that he puts you in the presence of God. And that's what everybody wants, and that's what everybody doesn't want. Because the light at the altar is different from every other light in the world. In the dim lamps of this world, we can compare ourselves with each other, and all of us come off looking good. We convince ourselves that God grades on the curve, and what's the difference? We're all okay. And then you come into the presence of God, and you're at the altar, and it's all different."²

This is hard for us to hear in our "You're o.k. – I'm o.k." world. "We aren't big into sin."³ I mean, really, how many of us think about how sinful we are on a daily basis? And yet, when we see ourselves in the light of God's righteousness, we see how far we fall short. John's message is that we need to repent, to turn our lives around, because of our sin.

President Calvin Coolidge's brevity was renowned. He returned home from church one Sunday. His wife asked what the minister's sermon

² Fred Craddock, "Have you ever heard John preach?" in *A Chorus of Witnesses*, 39.

³ Larry Chottiner, *Getting to Bethlehem – Again*, *Presbyterian Outlook*, Nov. 26, 2007.

was about. Coolidge replied, “Sin.” She said, “Well, what did the minister say about it?” The president answered, “He’s against it.”⁴

As I read this passage, I was struck by the fact that many Pharisees and Sadducees came to hear John preach. One commentator says that John speaking to the Pharisees and the Sadducees is “equivalent to saying that he is speaking to the Democrats and the Republicans, the fundamentalists and the liberals. Pharisees and Sadducees represented opposite ends of the political and religious spectrums in Judaism, but Matthew depicts them as united in their opposition to [Jesus].”⁵

It’s interesting that John’s Gospel states, “the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask John the Baptist, ‘Who are you?’” (1:19). Long believes this delegation of religious officials showed up, not because they were on a package tour of the Holy Land, but because they were there to take names: “No small talk. No pictures of grandchildren passed around. Just, ‘Who are you?’ ... There are some people going around taking names...and quickly, John moved from being a minister at work to being a man under a threat.”⁶

⁴ As told by Larry Chottiner, Getting to Bethlehem – Again, Presbyterian Outlook, Nov. 26, 2007.

⁵ Long, p. 29.

⁶ Long, “There’s a Man Going Around taking names,” Something is About to Happen, p. 27.

Name taking of this sort places a person on trial. Think of a police officer who stops you and asks, “Let me see your license.” In fact, it seems that, in a sense, we’re constantly on trial for something. Students are judged for their grades and SAT scores. Professors being considered for tenure are on trial for how much they’ve published. A stockholders’ meeting places the actions of the corporate officers on trial. It seems there’s always someone going around taking names “for the record.”

We’re under constant trial. And certainly crazy old John the Baptist is right that every one of us has things to repent. But the good news of Jesus Christ is that we’ve already been found “not guilty” in the highest court of all – God’s court. The Apostle Paul writes, “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? ...Who is to condemn?” The answer: No one, because of the one who died for us, was raised from the dead, and even now prays for us (Romans 8:34). No one can take our names anymore, no one can condemn us, because in Jesus Christ we’ve been given a new name.

I remember in the late 1970’s watching the tv mini-series *Roots*. There’s a scene in which the slave owners are trying to break the spirit of the young black man named Kunta Kinte. They’ve tied him to a tree, and with whips they’re attempting to beat into him a new name, a new, more

submissive identity. “Your name is Toby,” they say. When they ask him, “What’s your name,” Kunta Kinte resists for as long as he’s able: “My name is Kunta Kinte.” More resistance, and the whips fall again and again. Finally, he can’t take any more, and the young man hangs his head in defeat and speaks his slave name, “Toby.”

A black minister once spoke of his own enraged reaction when he saw that episode. “He admitted that, for a moment, he was consumed with hatred, not only for those who were beating Kunta Kinte, but for all white people, for all who, through the whip of racism, bring humiliation and shame to others. The only thing that kept this hatred from settling into his heart, he said, was the deep awareness of his faith in another man, a man who was also tied to a tree and beaten. ‘They took this man’s life,’ he said, ‘but they never took his name. And one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that name. Jesus is Lord.’”⁷

And the man who prepared the way for this Jesus was John the Baptist. John not only proclaims God’s judgment – John also offers God’s forgiveness. This is good news, indeed. Amen.

⁷Long, p. 31.