

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller

December 23, 2018

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:11-17, 76-79

All in the Family: John the Baptist

Luke, Chapter 1

11 *Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*

And then once John was born, his father Zechariah sang this song:

77 *"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.*

*And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace."*

The first Advent calendar appeared in 1851, and featured a biblical-character-a-day to count Christian worshippers down to Christmas. It featured, among others, John the baptizer, since John is featured in the stories of Jesus' birth and the beginning of his ministry.

Actually, John is one of the most prominent biblical figures in the Advent season. If we were following the schedule of weekly Bible readings we typically follow, we'd get the stories of John the Baptist the middle two weeks (and the first Sunday would have been an apocalyptic "end of days" reading!) If the Church published a monthly annual calendar, you could make the case for John the Baptist as "Mr. December." Even though the other readings change from year-to-year, John the Baptist remains and appears and dominates the scene EVERY year.

And if we'd been following the assigned readings for these Sundays, they wouldn't even be what we read this morning - how he fits into the Christmas Story, but rather his fiery preaching - Repent! - and wilderness baptizing. We'd be called a "brood of vipers" and be threatened with the "coming wrath," complete with winnowing fork and unquenchable fire.

We are a long way away from a Silent Night with a baby so tender and mild! Merry Christmas indeed!

This cousin of Jesus' would have a hard time fitting in to our current Advent celebrations and calendars. Especially since Advent calendars these days have been completely co-opted by our secular culture and have pretty much nothing to do with Christmas let alone Jesus. Have you seen some of them?

There's a Merry Fitmas daily protein supplement Advent calendar, or a daily-shot-of-tequila calendar. There are makeup Advent calendars and wine and scotch calendars. I even saw an Advent Calendar with dog treats! It's hard to imagine John amongst the tequila, makeup, wine, protein shakes and dog treats, gaunt and scowling: "Repent, ye brood of vipers!"

John the baptizer doesn't come off as lovable or domesticated in the Gospels; he lives in the boonies, his social skills are questionable; he's more fringe than mainstream. Chances are that John never took sensitivity training or a class in anger management.

Yet, John the baptizer is indispensable to the Christmas story – and, to the Christian story. Only two of the four Gospels even contain a narrative of Jesus' birth, but none of the Gospels tell us the Jesus-story without telling us about Jesus' cantankerous cousin John. The Eastern churches gave him the nickname "Forerunner" of Jesus. An ancient Father of the church (5th C) called him "a lamp preceding Christ" (Cyril of Alexandria). And a thousand years later during the Protestant Reformation he was called "a lantern which shone in front of the Son of God" (John Calvin).

In a word, John the Baptist gets us ready for Jesus, introduces us to Jesus.

Remember last week, when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, pregnant with John? John, not even born yet, kicks inside his mother when the two cousins meet. He knew, they knew, the import of this encounter, and the magnitude of what was to come, even as they probably couldn't imagine it.

But John does more than point to Jesus, though he certainly does that. He is really about preparing us for Jesus.

And you probably know a little bit about preparing these days. My guess is that all your errands this weekend have been preparing for Christmas. My lists have lists even! Preparing is hard work!

Or think about when cooking / baking...What's the first thing the experts tell us to do? READ the recipe. And then after that? Mise en place.... which means Put in place - when you chop all the onions and put them in a little bowl, and measure out all the spices and put them in little bowls. And I find that when I actually do those two things it sure goes better.

But Advent is not just preparing for a day - or a dinner - or a family gathering. We're also preparing for Jesus.

And the way John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus is by baptizing and preaching. And what he preaches seems to put him right in the fire and brimstone department.

"Repent!" Perhaps when you hear "Repent" you imagine big-haired televangelists, staring into the camera with all seriousness: "Repent, and be saved!" Or maybe you hear the word "repent" as, "feel really, really bad, because you're doing something wrong!"

But what if we could scrape away all the unhelpful layers of cultural rust from that old word and hear John's message in a new way. Not originally a "church" word, in the ancient world, to "repent" meant to turn, change course, rethink, reconsider. It "is the turning of our whole selves, without leaving anything behind, toward God; a refocusing of ... our feelings, affections, and instincts, in light of what God has done in Jesus Christ." (Yale professor Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?*)

Christian repentance isn't about guilt-tripping, but grace, transformation, and flourishing. It's about rethinking and rearranging everything – everything - in light of the victory accomplished at a Bethlehem feed trough and a Roman cross. In the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth, almighty God Himself has heard us, visited us, healed us, lifted us up, and freed us from all that seeks to harm us and bring us down.

THIS is who John the Baptist announces.

And to receive him, we need to prepare more than our homes; we need to prepare our hearts! Here's a poem that help us do just that.

On How to be a Manger
(Barbara Steffanus Gerniat)

Be empty
Be sturdy
Be soft inside
Be still
Be ready

Amen.