

Prepare the Way

R.G. Wilson-Lyons

Every year, the second Sunday of Advent is sort of unofficially known as John the Baptist Sunday. And I always find that a little humorous because the picture the gospels give us of John is not exactly the image we most think of this time of year. I mean if you want to find a way to get uninvited from all of your friends' Christmas parties, then you should send out cards that say, "Merry Christmas you brood of vipers." John the Baptist was a little bit different than "normal" people. He lived in the desert. He ate locusts and wild honey and his clothes were made of camel's hair. He didn't hold back when he preached. He called people names and told them about the coming wrath of God. He even condemned the king for which he would be arrested and eventually killed.

And yet, in spite of all this, people were drawn to him. People left the comfort of the city and came out into the desert to hear this crazy prophet rant and rave, they came to repent, they came to be baptized. In other words, there was something about the preacher in the desert that made sense to people, that helped them connect with God in ways that hadn't been able to connect before.

And if you stop and think about it for a minute, that's really amazing that people came to him at all. I think sometimes we hear stories from the Bible, especially familiar ones and they just become normal for us. But my guess is that for every single one of us, if someone dressed like John was standing on the street here right here on Canton Avenue shouting, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come," we would think he was a crazy person and would walk out of the way to avoid him. But that's not what people did. They were flocking to him? Why? Because their lives had gotten really bad. Things in Jerusalem were NOT OK for a lot of people.

Throughout the gospel of Luke, the writer is very careful to give us a number of historical markers. He wants us to know exactly when and where this is taking place because, for Luke, context is really important. The chapter begins by telling us who the emperor was – Tiberius, the governor as Pilate, the king was Herod, and the high priests were Annas and Caiphas. Now this is more important than just giving us a historical marker. It tells us something about the lived reality of the people. Whenever Rome conquered a territory, they set up puppet kings to rule over the region. Herod was a Jew who was made to be the king of the Jews by the emperor Tiberius and his representative Pilate. And Herod had some autonomy to rule as he wished so long as he kept the taxes coming in to Rome and put down any threats of rebellion. Herod also worked closely with the temple establishment and the high priests because Rome also allowed for freedom of religion so long as the religion didn't undermine the interests of Rome. In that way, then Herod, the king, and Annas and Caiphas, the high priests, were able to hold on to their power and position so long as they kept Rome happy. And, they were able to utilize their positions to personally benefit as long as they kept Rome happy.

The temple was no longer a place to encounter the presence of God, but rather it was a place that was serving the power of Rome. And so the people had to find another way to encounter God and to hear God's word, so they went to the Jordan River in the wilderness to be baptized by John for repentance of sin. But here's the thing. For centuries, the Jewish people had a system in place by which they could repent and be forgiven for sin. They would go to the temple and offer a sacrifice. And that was still happening when John started preaching in the desert. But it had been co-opted. The high priests were more interested in making money by selling the animals for the sacrifice than they were of being conduits of God's forgiveness. This is one of the reasons why later in the gospel of Luke, Jesus will enter the temple and overturn the tables.

Offering the means of forgiveness only to those who could pay was a major problem because if you couldn't afford to buy an animal to sacrifice, you couldn't be forgiven. The temple and its leadership then was able to offer forgiveness to those who could afford to pay for it, to the rich, to the socially respectable people. But it had nothing to offer the poor, nothing to offer the outcasts, nothing to offer those who felt crushed by Rome except condemnation and exclusion. And not only that, but the religious order of the day had set up a system of naming people – of identifying them into two groups. The clean people were the good people, the people who were labeled good. But then there was the unclean. Their identity, so they were told, was not image of God, but rather sinful, unworthy, "unclean." In such a world, the temple could offer no healing, it could not bring about the recognition of people's true identities as God's image because the temple was a part of that system of treating people as less than who God made them to be. The temple refused to allow the unclean in as equal members; refused to challenge the mentality that separates people as clean and unclean; refused to offer any alternative to the very system of domination that was causing so much pain and suffering. For the people coming to John to find healing, to find forgiveness, they couldn't go through the usual channels. They had to go through the wilderness.

John himself understood the corrupt nature of this system. That's why he called out Herod. That's why he condemned the religious elite. And that's why he offered a baptism for all – clean or unclean, rich or poor, Jew or Gentile. For John, in spite of his crazy rhetoric, in spite of his wild attire, he offered a baptism that was available to all, no matter what, and he condemned those who saw themselves as the gate keepers of God's grace and those who exploited the poor.

John specifically says as much when the people ask him what they must do to avoid the wrath that he is proclaiming and he responded by telling those with wealth and power to share with the poor and to stop exploiting people. For John, the whole point of religion was to connect all people to the power and love of God. The temple no longer provided that, so the people went to John into the wilderness where he offered a baptism for forgiveness along with words of judgment for those who wouldn't repent.

I have to confess though that I've never been a big fan of judgment....that is until I got involved with the pay day loan industry. For a long time, I had strong feelings about pay day loans as

people I knew and loved at Church without Walls found themselves in crippling debt due to interest rates that sometimes could be as high as 456%, but I really started liking the idea of wrath when the industry started harassing my church. Our office was broken into and someone stole some of the church's check and started cashing them at pay day loan places, to the tune of more than \$5000. We obviously reported the theft to the police and closed the bank account at church, so when the pay day loan company tried to draw the money from our bank account, it had been closed. There was no money for them to withdraw.

One day, I got a call from someone at the corporate office of the payday loan company. I thought he was simply checking on what happened. I told him about the theft, gave him the detective's name working the case, and referred him to the police report. But instead he demanded that I pay him all the money that his company had cashed checks for. When I refused, he demanded that I give him the name and phone numbers of everyone in leadership at Church without Walls. When I refused he began a profanity laced tirade against me and the church. I hung up. He called back...and kept calling back...and kept calling back demanding his money. He literally shut the phone lines down at the church for an entire day.

This was maybe the first time when I decided I really liked the concept of God's wrath and, let's just say, I went a little John the Baptist on the man. His whole business was based on exploitation of the poor and then he started harassing a church. I could really understand why John, preaching at a time when the poor were exploited by the religious and political establishment, preached that the ax was at the root of the trees and God was about to uproot and burn those responsible for that exploitation. John knew that the Messiah was coming to bring justice and end oppression, and preparing the way meant being the voice calling people to justice, calling for the end to exploitation, calling to those who have to share with those who don't.

And I would argue that is still the way we are called to prepare for the Messiah today. Just as those going out to John did so because they had found the usual channels to be more concerned with power and oppression than love and grace, so too are we called to be that wilderness community today – to be a refuge for those who are labelled unclean, to call the oppressors and exploiters to repentance, and to examine ourselves and the ways we are complicit in the systems of injustice and to turn from them. John got that part right.

But, as much as I sometimes like the idea of God's wrath – especially if I can talk about it being for someone else instead of me, I think John got that part wrong. When John was in prison, awaiting his execution, he began to have doubts about the purpose of his life. Jesus wasn't doing the things he expected him to do. There was a lot more loving and a lot less judgment than John anticipated, and so he sent some messengers to Jesus to find out what was going on. Jesus replied, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard. The blind are recovering their sight, those who are crippled are walking again, lepers are being healed, the deaf can hear, dead people are being brought to life again, and the good news is being given to those in need. And happy is the one who never loses his faith in me." You see, Jesus was able to bring good news to the poor and oppressed without unleashing the fire of hell on those who were

perpetrators of injustice. He taught that we are to “love our enemies,” and he transformed those who were oppressors not by condemning them but by going to dinner with them like he did with Zaccheus the tax collector. As much as I would love to say the solution to all of the world’s exploitation and oppression is to call down God’s wrath like John, I think the one who we are waiting for, the Messiah, asks something much harder of us – to change the world by entering into loving relationship.

John liked to talk a lot about fire. For him, the fire that he imagined was a destructive fire – one that rids the world of evil doers. But fire has many purposes. In our Old Testament reading, the prophet Malachi understood the fire of the Messiah to be a bit different – rather than a destructive fire, it’s a refining fire that purifies. This is actually the fire that Jesus brought into the world – one that absolutely challenges powers of oppression and injustice and hatred and violence, but one that does so not to destroy but to purify, to make whole and to make all things right.

When I was in seminary, I travelled twice to South Africa and while there I was able to learn about the church and the anti-apartheid movement. When apartheid collapsed, the incoming government of Nelson Mandella set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that would be chaired by Bishop Desmond Tutu. The idea was that the truth of the atrocities committed must be acknowledged for the country to move forward, but seeking revenge and punishment would not bring healing. So anyone who had committed an atrocity could appear before the commission, tell the truth about what they had done, and receive amnesty from prosecution. On one occasion, a former apartheid officer told about torturing and killing a young man who was a part of the anti-apartheid movement. He showed no remorse, but simply stone faced, told what he had done. Afterwards, the boy’s grandmother was asked if she had anything to say. She stood up and said, “I want to see the face of the man who killed my grandson,” but she was blind, so the way that she saw was by touch. They led her to the man who had killed her grandson and she rubbed her hands all over his face. Then she said, “I no longer have a grandson. So you must be my grandson and come and visit me regularly.” This hardened officer who moments before had no emotion became so overcome that he passed out. The headline in the paper the next day was “Fainted by Grace.”

Friends, that’s the kind of fire that Jesus has brought and is bringing into the world. It’s a fire that burns away all the hatred, all the greed, all the lust for power within each of us until only love remains. This is the fire for which we are called to prepare – here during Advent and for our entire lives. Amen.