

“Getting Ready for Christ(mas)”
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A Reflection for the 2nd Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 11.1-10; Matthew 3.1-12

December 8, 2019

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You won't find him in a nativity set. He's not invited.

John the Baptizer, John the Baptist, Yohanan ben Zekaryah . . . the crazy relative (quite literally; he was Jesus' cousin) who we don't want at Christmas dinner. We just don't know what's going to come out of his mouth.

Actually, we do. That's the problem.

John is not invited, but he shows up anyway. He is necessary. We need to get ready for Christ. We need John to get us ready.

II

John is out in the wilderness, which brings a lot of echos in the story of God's People. The wilderness has been a place of testing, and punishment, and preparation, and formation.

John is dressed wildly: a camel hair outfit accessorized with the latest in leather belts. Again, this echoes. That's what Elijah dressed like.¹ Elijah was among the greatest of God's prophets, people God called to speak God's word. God promised to bring Elijah back, when God bursts onto the scene again.² John is like Elijah! God's day is here!

John is baptizing. That is odd. This sort of full-bodied, ritual washing happens when someone from outside becomes a Jew, adopted into God's Family. Who is John baptizing? Jews, who are already God's Family. Israel. What's that about?³

John is shouting. God is breaking Heaven into the world. Heaven's Kingdom, God's Reign, here it comes! No one makes it happen. No one can stop it. It's all God. All you can do is brace yourself. Get ready!

¹ Compare Matthew 3:4 with 2nd Kings 1:8.

² Malachi 4:5. When Christians were collecting the books of the Hebrew Bible into their "Old Testament," they ordered them so that Malachi was the last. (The Jewish Bible – Tanakh – ends with 2nd Chronicles.) So the Old Testament ends with a promise of Elijah's return in the messianic age. Shortly after it begins, the New Testament tells of "Elijah's" arrival in the form of John the Baptizer.

³ Frederick Dale Bruner, Matthew, A Commentary: Volume 1 The Christbook (Revised and Expanded Edition) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 93.

This is what Advent is about: getting ready. Ready or not, it is coming. Better: *he is coming*. Not Christmas. Christ. With Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven, is here.

III

Many were going to be baptized. Pharisees and Sadducees were going to watch.⁴

Sadducees were upper-class. They were the priests who ran the Temple. They ran the government. They managed the relationship between Israel and Rome, the occupying power. To keep their position, Sadducees needed stability. So they made compromises. When you hear “Sadducee,” think Sophisticated, Stability, and Small (they were the tiny elite).

Pharisees were working-class. Theirs was a grassroots social movement. They wanted religion to be of the people, and for the people. They believed living faithfully to God and God’s ways was for everyone. But they did not water things down. Preserving God’s Law, living rightly and purely in all parts of life, was vital. The Pharisee movement was vibrant and widespread. When you hear “Pharisee,” think Popular, Purity, and Preservation.

These are very different and opposed groups. Why did Pharisees and Sadducees both come to see John? To observe and evaluate him? To determine whether to condemn him or endorse him? To decide about John?

IV

Whatever. John decides about them. He assaults them with blistering words.

*Children of snakes. Where did you get the idea you can get away from God’s wrath? If your life has really turned around, then show it. You belong to God’s People, Abraham’s family. Congratulations! [slow clap] You know God can make more children for Abraham out of nothing. God’s done it before. God is evaluating you. Are you producing a harvest? Or will you get cut down and burned up?*⁵

Notice who John is yelling at. God’s People. Not outsiders. Not the oppressors. Not the exploiters. Not the bad guys. Remember, it’s God’s People whom John is baptizing. Now it’s the leaders of God’s People he’s blasting. It’s the best, most spiritual, popular and influential guides of God’s People he’s confronting. They are the problem that needs to change.

We are the problem that needs to change.

It’s a trap we fall into. *The problem is out there! They need to change.*

⁴ For what follows about these two important groups in 1st-century Judaism, see Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, Recovering Jesus: The Witness of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007), 90-93, and Bruner, 90.

⁵ My paraphrase of Matthew 3.7-10, with some help from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*.

Try this. What is something happening in our world, something touching you, that has got you really concerned? What will solve that problem? Who has to change to do that?

It's much easier if it is "them." That's the trap.

We want to be over here, alongside Pharisees and Sadducees, and other people like us. Watching. Pointing. *"Look at them going to John. Look at them getting cleaned up. Look at them changing their minds, their hearts, and their lives. Good ! About time!"*

V

But John sees us. He is God's prophet! He's walking over with his scary, God-filled eyes. He's getting so close, you can smell him, and it's not nice.

He is not nice. What needs saying is too important to be nice about it. John assaults us with blistering words. God's wrath.

Did you come to worship today for a blast of God's wrath? Me neither. That's why we don't want John in our nativity scenes, messing with our Christmas. Today is Peace Candle Sunday. Wrath is not peaceful.

But it's vital, for peace. For there to be peace, what's wrong has to be dealt with.

God's wrath is not God being grumpy and irritable. It's not God blind with rage. It's not God hating. God's wrath is God loving.

I read this, and I find it so helpful. *"The wrath of God . . . is the love of God in friction with injustice."*⁶ God loves, always. So when one of God's beloved suffers injustice, or one of God's beloved inflicts injustice, or God's beloved are caught up in a world of injustice so we are both victims and perpetrators at the same time, and we are all, often without knowing it, God's love is going to grate against the injustice.

Because God loves, God is going to raise up prophets like John, to shine God's blazing, blinding, very uncomfortable heat on what's wrong, including what's wrong in you and me, God's People.

God's wrath is because God loves. That's good news. But not when we try to stand far-off and fling it at others. Only when you see that God's wrath has to do with you and me.

⁶ Burner, 92.

VI

These days, there is an idea among many Christians that our society needs to “Put Christ back into Christmas.” If more would realize that “Jesus is the Reason for the Season,” things would be better.

I don't think that's what John would say. He's say something like, “Put Christ into Christians!” Whatever might be wrong “out there,” God is also dealing with what's “in here,” in us.

We need to sit with this uncomfortable tension, this (I hope) realization that what is wrong includes us.

Repent. Change. Turn in a new direction. That's John's word to us, and it's important.

But not the last word for us. *“The kingdom of heaven is here!” . . . “One more powerful is coming.”*

Jesus' work began with John. But Jesus did not end there.

Repent is not just a challenge. It is Jesus' promise. What's wrong in you, Jesus already dealt with. Jesus is the change in you. Jesus is your new direction. Jesus is God's new thing.

Get ready for Christmas? Fine.

Better. Get ready for Christ.