

## “On the Road to Bethlehem: Through the Wilderness with John the Baptist”

Sunday, December 16, 2018

I

A few years back, a friend of mine and his wife went to a funeral ... out in rural Virginia, at a little country Baptist church. And at one point, the preacher at that church put both hands on the pulpit and leaned into it like this. And with his face red from the effort, shouted, “It's too late for Matthew Brown here! He's dead! But it's not too late for you! Turn your life around now while you have the time and make yourself right with God. Do it! Before it's too late. Like it is now for ol' Matt!”

Well anyway, on the way home in their car, my friend said to his wife, “I mean, that preacher. And that sermon! Did you ever hear of anything so tacky?” His wife said, “Yeah, I agree.” And then after a couple of minutes she added, “But you know, what he said ... was true. He was right!”

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Which brings me to John the Baptist here in our Gospel reading this morning. John in fact is one of my favorite characters in our New Testament story. I mean he bursts forth from the Judean desert – that wasteland – a land hardly blessed by God, a land where evil spirits prowl. Nothing inviting about this desert whatsoever. It's harsh! Not much human, not much of anything to be found. Yet there, among the wild beasts and howling desert wind, Luke says that “the Word of God” came to John. And the Gospel of Jesus Christ was born.

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And see, John the Baptist doesn't fool around. He lives on a thin diet in this wilderness 'round the dead Sea. And he wears clothes that even rummage sale folks wouldn't touch. And when he preaches, it's fire and brimstone time. “The kingdom's coming all right”, he shouts ... shouts like that Baptist preacher at that funeral. And he says, “if you think it's gonna be a picnic, you'd better think again: 'Cause if you don't shape up, God'll give you the axe 'like an elm with blight.”

And it seems John especially likes to address his little flock as snakes in a pit. Doesn't begin his sermons with “Dear friends ...” but with, “You bunch of snakes! Your only hope,” he yells, “is to clean up your act as if your life depends on it. ... Which, by the way, it does.” And then he shouts, “So get baptized right away to show you've cleaned up your act!”

Now some s'posed he was Elijah come back from the grave. And some s'posed he was the Messiah. But John'd have none of that! He says, “I'm the one yelling my face blue ... trying to knock some sense into you bunch of snakes ... slimy snakes sunnin' on a rock!” Oh, John had winning ways all right.

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Now who're these folks he's shouting at? Who's he yelling at, with neck veins bulging? Well it seems he shouts out to the respected, the learned, the linen clad, those in the know, those on the in! But John

doesn't care. No, he's no respecter of persons. So he punches these pillar's complacency. He winds them, punching them with his words, blows 'em away.

"What you need," he shouts, "is a little less smugness and a great deal more self-exam. Wake up! And seek the living Lord! Repent and wade through the waters of baptism, clean for the road ahead."

Oh yeah ... John the Baptist had winning ways, OK.

## II

So here we go again. It's that time of year. You may be sitting here thinking, "Do we have to endure this 'bat in the belfry' one more time? Can't we just say that John's just another nut who's dropped off the deep end, lost his grip, another candidate for the funny farm? I mean, let's just move on with life as it is, and let this Advent trip unfold as it seems good to us. God knows that with all the shopping to be done, and all the parties to be planned, and all the Alka Seltzer needed to get us through them all – why on earth do we have to hear from this desert loony again? And again. And yet again. Why do we have to take up our precious time with this guy who's fled what we all seem to embrace? Why do we have to be shouted at – again – by this weird, shadowy guy? Oh please give us ... L. L. Bean instead. Anything but this fire-breathing, world-hating ascetic who says that unless you and I change our ways, God is gonna vaporize the whole thing in a flash. Please ... just spare us!

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But on the other hand ... on the other hand ... maybe there is, after all, an appeal to John and his message that resists our wish to tame him. Maybe ... there's a need deep inside of you and me that endures and nags ... a need that we have to face ... and not just 'cause Advent forces us to.

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See, I think it is kind of frightening to hear John preach. I mean, he uses some pretty strong images: Ax at the root of the tree, wheat and chaff. Chaff's burned, save the wheat. Repent! It is ... kind of scary stuff!

But hey! Since we're pretty sure "God grades on the curve," what's the difference? I'm OK, you're OK. We're all OK. But then all of a sudden, you hear John preach ... and you come into God's presence, and everything just looks different. 'Cause if – in the dark of the night – your own heart condemns you, think about this. God already knows everything about you. And this insight's called, in some circles, the moment of truth. I know ... deep down who and what I am. And God help me ... God knows.

So now, as preacher Fred Craddock liked to say, the whining is over. The whining ... is just over. The excusing is over. You know ... it's my ex, it's the church, it's my boss, it's the government. 'Cause it isn't. All that's just over. It just stops. Like shutting off the radio, and you still hear that rat gnawing in the wall ... and the roof leaks ... and the rent's due. That's just the truth of it.

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See, in my mind, I serve God. But there's another force in my life. And I say, "I'm going to do that." But I don't do it. Or I say, "I'll never do that again." But I do. That's just the truth. So I bet you do know in your heart what a moment of truth is like. And I think you want it, and you don't want it. But you can bury the truth of your life as deep as a bone; it's still there. Whether you live in the fast lane or the slow, it doesn't matter, it's still here. It doesn't matter if you're living high on the hog, or if you lean your face into that post office window and say, "are the government checks late again?" It's all the same. I think – no matter who you are – your need for the truth ... for that truth that shines in the night ... is the same.

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Now those moments of truth come to us, sometimes in the night that you spend locked in your mind . . . sometimes in some violent, angry exchange. But they come! They come. These moments of truth. ... So in the back of your skull ... you hear John the Baptist shout, "Repent ... and return to the Lord ..."

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Well ... let's talk about sin. See, sin comes in so many forms. Selfishness, arrogant pride, despair. In fact, thinking about it, maybe pride isn't the main problem for lots of folks, but maybe despair is. Despair that things'll never change for you, that you'll never change, that no matter what you say or do, you're stuck, stuck forever in the mess you've made of your life, or the mess someone else's made of it. But in any case, there's no hope for you, no beginning again. No chance of new life.

See, despair happens all kinds of ways. Here's the family man who loses his job and agrees to stay home and take care of the house, just till he gets back on his feet. But month after month, he finds no work! And one day his wife comes home to see him slumped in front of the TV with two empty six-packs by his feet.

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And here's a moody teen who doesn't know what's wrong with himself. He's depressed but can't find anyone to talk to. His dad's never home and his mother turns every exchange into a sermon, and he's ashamed to be seen leaving the counselor's office at school. So he starts hangin' with some kids who are even moodier than he is. And gets arrested for stealing CDs at Walmart. And when his mom picks him up at the police station, she tells him he's been nothin' but trouble since the day he was born! And something inside of him ... just breaks ... dies. And all that remains to be seen is just how much trouble he can be. He'll try not to let her down.

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Yeah, maybe for lots of folks, despair is more serious a problem than pride. But since I believe God will not give up on you and me ... no matter what ... maybe with the help of God's grace, we shouldn't give up on ourselves ... hoping ... believing in God's goodness more than in our own badness ... believing in a God who believes in you and me.

So as someone's said, maybe in the end this is what John the Baptist offers folks: A fresh start, a cure for despair. And he offers it as a beginning, not as an end. 'Cause he knew there was Someone coming after him who had something much more than he had to offer. And so he was content to be God's watchdog, nipping at peoples' heels to get their attention so that they'd be wide awake for what comes next. Repent and return ... forgiven!!

### III

Well ... finally. Forgiven!! The Bible calls it a new beginning. What's that like? What's that like. Well as someone's said, "picture a child, third grade, trying to do arithmetic, in a hurry, bell's about to ring, teacher's fussin', 'Hurry up, children.' So this child tries to erase a mistake, tears the paper, makes a black smear, starts to cry. Teacher comes by, says 'oh my goodness.' And teacher slides a brand-new sheet of paper there and says, 'Why don't you just start over?' The Bible calls it a new birth."

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So let's live these Advent weeks hovering 'round this weird guy in the desert. Needing to hear his message. 'Cause we know in our hearts that the old ways just aren't working. So we walk cautiously up to hear John preach, not knowing what we're gonna have to face ... holding our breath, hoping for another chance, wanting to get our lives in order.

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So finally here's the take-home question: Do you and I move forward ... or turn back to business as usual? See, I think this Baptist guy haunts us, 'cause you and I could be different ... the world could be different ... dreaming what it would be like to end our exile and go home ... home to neighbor love, home to self love, home to trust ... going all the way to Bethlehem. But I am afraid the only way to Bethlehem is through John's desert.

So go ahead through that wilderness. ... God knows ... it's worth the risk.

Amen.

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1. Resources used: *Luke: Interpretation Series* by Fred Craddock; *Synthesis for Advent 2 and 3*, December 9 and 16; *Home by Another Way* by Barbara Brown Taylor; *Craddock Stories* by Fred Craddock (edited by Mike Graves and Richard Ward).