

Gary L. Bagley
Hilton Presbyterian Church
Newport News, Virginia
December 13, 2009

Bethlehem by Way of John the Baptist
Luke 3:7-18;

There's a part of me that would just as soon step over the second and third Sundays of Advent. The gospel readings from these two Sunday's lectionary reading usually feature John the Baptist as the central figure. While the rest of society's Christian culture is readying themselves to visit God's maternity ward on Christmas Eve—the manger holding the baby Jesus with Mary, Joseph, angels, and shepherds at hand—the gospel of John the Baptist seems to be tearing at those kinds of gentle images.

Actually, he is only called "John the Baptist" by Matthew. Mark calls him "John the baptizer" with a lower case "b." Luke refers to him as John the son of Zechariah, while the fourth gospel just calls him "John." Though his title may vary from gospel to gospel, his character doesn't.

Envisioned as woolly haired, dressed in clothes made of camel skins, with a diet of insects and honey, he's not exactly the guest preacher you want leading your Christmas Eve service. The opening sentence in today's gospel portion reads:

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

The closing sentence of today's gospel offers the words:

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

So much for "good news." Or, maybe there is something in this passage that can cause us to respond with "The Word of the Lord; Thanks be to God" after hearing this passage.

Father Richard Rohr reminds us of a parallel to the conversation Jesus had with his disciples on the road to Caesarea Philippi in which he asked them, "Who are people saying that I am?" The parallel is a story in which Buddha and his disciples were walking together and Buddha asked his followers a similar question: "Who are people saying I am?" His followers said one thing and then another. Then, one of them asks the Buddha, "Who are you?"

He replied, "I am awake."¹

One strong message that permeates the Advent Season is that of waking up—to life, to those around us, to God, to opportunities, to our shortcomings, to our inconsistencies. "Waking up," that Advent theme, involves see things for what they really are.

A Jewish Rabbi and a Catholic Priest met at the town's annual 4th of July picnic. Old friends, they began their usual banter. "This baked ham is really delicious," the priest teased the rabbi. "You really ought to try it. I know it's against your religion, but I can't understand why such a wonderful food should be forbidden! You don't know what you're missing. You just haven't lived until you've tried Mrs. Hall's prized Virginia Baked Ham. Tell me, Rabbi, when are you going to break down and try it?"

The rabbi looked at the priest with a big grin, and said, "At your wedding."

Matthew's version of this story has John in conflict with the Pharisees whose status, learning, and accomplishment had a way of belittling the prophet. In Luke, the conflict is also between Jews and Gentiles. His prescription for all who have come to him for baptism is the same—"bear fruit worthy of repentance." Nothing short of a mental and spiritual U-turn is of any good to John. He is not interested in what they believe. The baptizer is concerned about their behavior. John's exhortations to these people have a way of summoning an integrity of action, memory, and identity. He exhorted them to act out of what they already knew. Like most preaching, it was a reminder of what they already knew they should be doing. For this son of Zechariah, repentance had less to do with how fervently one prays or how faithfully one attends the worship service; instead, it had everything to do with how one handled riches, executed public service, and exercised stewardship.

Three questions came from the "crowds," the "tax collectors," and finally the "soldiers." The "crowds" asked him, "What then should we do?" His practical answer was to care for the needy and practice truth and justice. He says not a word about ritual, about the temple, about sacrifice. He admonishes them

¹ Richard Rohr, from the online "Richard's Daily Reflection," quoting from his book, *Preparing for Christmas* (Saint Anthony Messenger Press: 2008).

to share their possessions, whether food or clothing, with those less fortunate. They are not commanded to distribute everything they have and thus *become* the needy and the naked. They are to share from their excess, however large or little it may be.

The tax collectors asked, “Teacher, what should we do?” He told them to be fair and honest in a field known for its corruption and greed.

The soldiers, a surprising group of participants in John the Baptist’s audience, said, “And we, what should we do?” The soldiers were warned about the greed that their position enabled them to act upon.

To all, John’s call is to bear fruit from the tree of our lives. It was not enough to lazily claim oneself as the fruit of Abraham (the descendents of Abraham), or as members in the Roman army. It is not enough to presume that because one is a child of the church, a “good citizen,” or a person of status, one is secure before God. Don’t confuse “sitting on a limb” with being the tree or its fruit.

And, take notice of his opening sentence when he calls them a “brood of vipers.” He is not calling them vipers. A “brood” is the product, the children, of vipers. Are the accusations against the brood of vipers or against the vipers? Are John’s accusations here against his hearers, or against their ancestry, their authority, or by extension their tradition?

Whose message is strong enough to lead us to the repentance to which we are called? Not the church’s, for it is too easily a snake pit. Not our own insight, for we are as needy as anyone in the crowd—hoarding coats and food when others are in need. We are as the tax collectors, dependent upon unjust structures for our livelihood. We are as the occupying army, caught in a culture of exploitation and violence.

The message that comes to us to change, to bear fruit, to focus more on behavior than beliefs is not in the wake-up call, or a mission statement, or the preaching of the gospel. It is in the One who does more than water the tree. It is the life of the tree itself. It is the One about whom our culture sings during this season of the year. He is the one who calls us to wake up and change our ways, for God’s sake.

In the Spring of 1630, John Winthrop led a fleet of eleven vessels and 700 passengers—mostly wealthy puritans—to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the New World, what is now the Boston area. Before setting foot on land, this Puritan governor preached a sermon later to be known as “A Model of Christian Charity.” His sermon laid out a religious vision for the settlers. He felt God had called New England to be a model society—one shaped by justice, compassion, and charity. The test of American faithfulness, he proclaimed, would not be purity of doctrine. Rather, they would be judged on the basis of their actions. He advised to follow the counsel of Micah—to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.” The Massachusetts Bay Colony was to be a “city on a hill.”²

While John’s message has a way of distracting us from rushing to Bethlehem, his message of repentance—doing a mental and spiritual U-turn—is the only one that can truly bring us to the life-giving presence of Christ.

John said, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit...”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

² Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (New York, HarperCollins: 2006), 162.

Luke 3:7-18

7John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 9Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

10And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" 11In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." 12Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" 13He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." 14Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

15As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

18So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.