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Unlikely Messengers: John The Baptist

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 11:1-10

¹A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. ³His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; ⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. ⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁰On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

The New Testament Lesson: Matthew 3:1-12

³In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" ⁴Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume 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. ¹⁰Even 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. ¹¹“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Unlikely Messengers: John The Baptist

In those days, John the Baptist *appeared* in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

I love how Matthew introduces John this way, like some kind of apparition or magic trick. One day there was only desert, hard-scrabble sand and stone, no living thing visible to the naked eye, and the next day, there was this figure, wild-eyed and bushy-bearded, and - let's be honest - a little scary, dunking people in the river.

The image on the cover of your bulletin is from an old Byzantine icon of John, serving as a reminder that there were hipsters long before Brooklyn was just a gleam in someone's eye.

John's the kind of guy a Vacation Bible School can run wild with, the kind of figure that will lodge in a child's imagination. He wore camel-skins and ate bugs and was essentially homeless. He was not known for his gentle tone or his pastoral care. He's the kind of guy who ruins Thanksgiving because, no, Uncle Ron, he will not ignore that comment you just made under your breath. John says what he thinks. It's kind of his thing.

I think to the religious elite – the priests and rabbis and hoity-toity of Jerusalem, it must have seemed like he slithered out from underneath some rock. I think this is how it almost always appears to the establishment when a prophetic voice emerges from the waste places of our culture. Hence the myth that Rosa Parks was just tired that day on the bus, instead of a trained activist. Hence the notion that the Native peoples gathering mightily at Standing Rock just emerged from the plains like ghosts from history, rather than a chronically oppressed culture that predates our own.

From the perspective of the power centers, the prophetic voice appears suddenly, like an apparition or a magic trick. But of course, John didn't just appear from nowhere. The Gospel of Luke gives us glimpses of his childhood. We discover that before he was John the Baptist, he was just John, the son of Elizabeth, cousin of Jesus, rowdy and radicalized from the womb. Well before Gabriel's famous visit to Mary, the angel paid a visit to Zechariah, father of John.

"Your wife Elizabeth will bear a child," said the angel, "and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord" (Luke 1).

Who knows what Zechariah and Elizabeth imagined when this glowing pronouncement was made – probably not the wild man that John turned out to be. But we have to give him points for consistency – when Mary traveled to Elizabeth's house to share the news of her own unlikely pregnancy, John beat her to the punch, leaping in Elizabeth's womb at the very sight of Jesus' mother. And indeed, for his entire career he was pointing his finger and his rhetoric at his slightly younger cousin Jesus – the One who is coming.

One night I was walking down Charles Street in Station North, on my way to see a movie. All of a sudden a woman stepped out of the alley in an outfit that I can only describe as extremely modest. A blouse straight out of "Little House on the Prairie." An ankle-length skirt. No make-up on her face and her long hair pulled up into a tight bun. Her eyes were pure fire. She held a large sign in her hands with big red letters painted

on it. It read, "Repent! Jesus is coming!" She came directly up to me. I took a deep breath.

"What are you doing out here?" she said.

"Well, I'm - "

"Just walking the streets!" she cried. "Just looking for trouble!"

"Actually I'm on my way to a movie," I said, defensively.

"In a neighborhood where there is SIN on every corner!" she hissed. I could see her running through her rolodex of sins, just imagining what my vice might be. Then she switched gears, "Do you know Jesus?" she said.

"I - I think so," I stammered.

"Well," she said abruptly, breaking into a big smile. "If you want to *really* know what it's all about..." and she took a flyer out of her bag, "come see my one-woman show! It's called 'Repent.' Showing right across the street at the Yellow Bird Theater."

She was an actress. I never made it to her show but I will give her credit for an solid marketing campaign. It was incredible to think about the emotions that she managed to trigger in me in our sixty-second interaction. Surprise. Anger. Shame. Fear.

No wonder. No wonder we recoil a little bit at John the Baptist and his fire and brimstone sermons. It's everything we hate about religion.

But John appears again every Advent season, that stubborn apparition, violating our Christmas cheer. But before we dismiss him as a modern day street preacher, a shame-monger, I think we would do well to step back and pay closer attention to the complex politics of the moment depicted in today's text.

First things first: the Roman Empire. Israel had labored under the control of various imperial forces over the centuries, but the Romans conquered the region about 60 years before John was born. Jews in Palestine lived in an agrarian society, which was itself part of a largely aristocratic empire. Here's what that means. ¹

There were really only two classes of people in John the Baptist's time. The working poor – mostly farmers – and the wealthy governing class. An farming economy is different from a modern industrial economy in many ways, but essentially there was very little trading and hence very few opportunities to move up the ladder. If you were a poor farmer, you grew enough food to survive and you paid your taxes – taxes that were often the equivalent of 30-70% of your crop.

Suffice it to say, the vast majority of people – 93% - were very poor. How did the aristocratic elite manage and govern the 93%? Essentially, the Empire maintained control of its vast area by using “retainers.” Retainers were essentially working-class people groomed and selected to collect taxes, instill the rule of law, and perform specialized roles in the community. In exchange for doing these things, they enjoyed some of the privileges of upper-class life, but at any point they could be easily replaced by the governing class.

This group of retainers included the Pharisees named in today's text. Pharisees were essentially lay people who became masters of religious life through rigorous study and practice. Sadducees were another elite class of Jewish leaders, drawing more upon their aristocracy than their rigor, but make no mistake: both Pharisees and Sadducees were still firmly under the thumb of Roman Empire and its governor – Herod the Great.

So class and political power are two important lenses through which to view the Pharisees and Sadducees. But to really understand their clash with John the Baptist you also have to understand their religious function. Religious life in John's day revolved around the temple in Jerusalem. If you want to be as close as possible to God, go to the

¹ All of this background information is drawn largely from Anthony Saldarini's "Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees in Palestinian Society," Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001, pp. 35-40.

temple. If you want to be forgiven of sins, you would go to the temple to offer sacrifices. If you wanted to give your tithes and offerings as the Bible instructed, you would go to the temple.

So the Pharisees help manage the considerable wealth of the Temple. They also speak with religious authority. This gave them an additional layer of power that the governors of the Empire did not take for granted. As religious leaders they were expected to help quell political discontent through the region as it arose.

So take all of that into consideration. Consider the John's own father, Zechariah, was a priest of the Temple, relatively respected in the centers of power. Consider this prophecy given about John the Baptist, that he would be a great and holy leader that would return the people to God.

Now imagine as he grows into a man and the radicalism of his childhood is not diminished. He loves God but sees the Temple and its gatekeepers as hopelessly compromised. He leaves the city altogether, roving around the desert, talking about a different way of living.

In the eyes of the establishment he is no one to worry about, but then the crowds begin to come. They flock out of the cities and into the wilderness to listen to a man says they can be forgiven without visiting the Temple, without kissing the Emperor's ring. And all of a sudden, he appears on the radar of the elite, like an apparition, like a magic trick. And the Pharisees and Sadducees head out to see it for themselves.

"You brood of vipers!" he says. "Who warned you to flee the wrath to come? Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestors,' for I tell you that from these stones God is able to raise up children."

He's basically saying: "We don't need you to talk to God and we don't need you to serve God."

And then, we can't gloss over the hellfire: "Even now the ax is lying at the foot of the tree. Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and burned in the fire."

...Merry Christmas?

It's a harsh message for Advent. We prefer to think of preparing the way in terms of sanctuary decorations, pageant rehearsals, and caroling. In short, it is a hopeful, comforting tradition. The essence of tradition is: *the same every year*. Hope, Joy, Peace, Love, right on cue.

But John is outside our gates, angry, crying out: "Get your house in order!" It's as though he's saying – the joy of Christmas is real, sure. But if you think you are going to get there through business as usual, then you are more cynical than I thought.

It's jarring to invoke the fires of hell at Christmas – maybe at any time – but what is hell? Hell is a world where no one actually cares for each other or means what they say. A world where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and the church is busy telling everyone to mind their manners. Hell is a world where everything is terrible and nothing changes and the church sings hymns.

That hell, John says, is very real, and at our door.

When I was in high school I was friends with a couple of girls that we can call Rebecca and Emily. They were sweet girls and they were inseparable and they were partners in crime. It's no wonder they were friends – their parents were best friends. They had played with each other in the crib, their mothers commiserating over the challenges of parenthood at the exact same time. They grew up together, playing on the same soccer teams, going to the same summer camps. They were almost sisters.

I guess it shouldn't be so surprising that they started drinking at the same time, plastic cups of some cheap keg beer handed out at a field party outside of town.

Within a matter of months, it was common knowledge that Rebecca and Emily were down to party. If there was a party, they were there. It wasn't too long before they were trying different drugs. Sometimes they would skip the parties altogether and just drop acid with a guy who worked at the convenience store around the corner from the high school. Their grades were slipping.

And then Rebecca's parents confronted her. They wrote long letters that led to screaming fights. She was grounded for half of her senior year. She *hated* them.

Emily's parents, on the other hand, didn't say a word. No letters. No questions when she showed up after curfew, wobbly on her feet. She started to realize they were never going to bring it up, even though they had surely discussed it with Rebecca's parents. It was like "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." She partied through her senior year. "Why can't my parents just be cool like yours?" Rebecca would fume over the phone.

And because this is a real story, not an afterschool special, I will add that they both turned out just fine. Went to college, have good jobs and families, etc.

But here's the thing. Twenty years later, Emily is haunted by her parent's silence. At fifteen she felt like the luckiest kid she knew. At thirty-five she can't shake the anger. She has a daughter of her own. "If I *knew* my daughter was doing drugs with some grown man around the corner," she said to me one night, shaking with anger, "and I just sat there watching TV, I would never forgive myself." She's started writing long letters to her parents about it, still grappling with her disappointment, with the limits of their love.

I think that's the danger that John feels is so eminent. The danger that we've replaced our fierce hope for change with religious traditions that just skate along the surface of our deeply broken world. Whatever we gain by maintaining a smooth façade right now, he warns us, is going to come out in the wash.

The word “repent” comes with a lot of baggage. That’s why the actress in Station North knew she could push some buttons with her sign. The word comes preloaded with shame that we are right to resist. Shame rarely does any good and it does plenty of harm. But let’s not assign our modern baggage to John the Baptist.

The Greek word for “repent” is “metanoia.” “Meta” means change and “noia” means thinking or purpose. “Change your ways!” cries John the Baptist. “The Kingdom of God is drawing near!”

And what kind of change does John have in mind? Matthew doesn’t say, but Luke adds some revealing additional dialogue. When the crowd asks, “What then should we do?” he replies:

“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” (3:11)

He goes on to tell the soldiers to respect those they police, and he tells the tax collectors to take no more than they are owed. Do these things, he says, and you are preparing the way for One who is coming to transform the world.

It’s hard for me not to think of the raw anger of our own country when taking a deep dive into John’s followers. It’s hard to watch the 93%, the desperate, angry, and disillusioned, streaming away from the Temple, the City, the Establishment, convinced that there is no hope, joy, peace, or love for them there. Compromised leadership, proclaiming ways forward where there are no ways forward.

I can understand why anyone is uncomfortable with John the Baptist. Uncomfortable with his anger, his fire and brimstone, his demand that everyone repent. We shy away from that kind of language, especially in the progressive church, because one of our boilerplate principles is the deep respect for individual belief and experience. Who are we, after all, to impose some kind of moral agenda, some kind of dogma, on other people?

But for those of us in more privileged circles, whether by race or class or ability or circumstances, this election has been a wake-up call that we have too often been afforded the luxury of silence. Afforded the opportunity to engage in the particular conversations that interest us, to the exclusion of others. Afforded the luxury of skating along the surface of deep pain and desperation, expecting our traditions to remain untouched.

Change is needed. Deep, real, abiding change. One thing I like about John is that he tells everyone to repent. He's got the angry, poor, oppressed people in the river, too. But his real wrath is directed to the religious people who are so adamant that everything is fine.

If you are a person who thinks that everything is fine, if you are a person who feels that 2016 just appeared on our horizon like some kind of apparition – a magic trick – consider what you might not have been seeing. Consider how you might need to change. It's not easy work. But it is essential.

The other thing I like about John the Baptist? He's not promoting himself. He is always, always, pointing to the One who is coming.

John the Baptist might present like an angry parent, shaking his finger. But you know what it really is? It's love. It's love that says, "We have to change." It's peace that says, "Things can't stay the way they are." It's hope that says, "I will see you and I will listen to you and we will work together to make this sanctuary a truly safe space, where everyone has a jacket and no one is exploited." It's joy that says, "One is coming who doesn't function like I function. One is coming who says, "There is a light in the darkness and the dark has not overcome it." There is a kingdom coming that looks quite different from this one. A kingdom where lion lays down with lamb and the child plays without fear. A kingdom of peace."

It's a beautiful image and we do eventually get there. But – yes – we have to change. We have to change. We can change.

To say that we can't or won't is to accept a hell of our own making. But One is coming who says otherwise.