

The Hinge of History
Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12
The Second Sunday of Advent, (Dec. 4) 2022
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The central figure of Advent is John the Baptist. Today and next Sunday, the lectionary readings are focused on John. He is Advent. And while we tend to think of Advent as getting ready for Christmas, John has other ideas. While “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” is on our playlist, John shouts, “You brood of vipers! Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees!”

We don’t receive Christmas cards addressed to “you brood of vipers” and John is not on any Advent calendars. There are no Christmas ornaments for John, and he does not have a place in our nativity scenes. John does not fit. He doesn’t fit with the season. He’s out of sync with our times, yet he is the central figure of Advent.

John doesn’t even live among regular folk. He doesn’t live in village, and he doesn’t live in Jerusalem. He lives out in the wilderness, out in the desert, in a van down by the river. (That’s a joke.) Off by himself, out in the middle of nowhere, shouting and preaching and baptizing in the river.

William Sloane Coffin used to say, “Those furthest from the seats of power are often nearer to the heart of things.” And nearer to the heart of God. That was where John was – furthest from the seats of power so he could be nearer to the heart of God. Today’s American evangelical church tends to seek the opposite: try to get as close to the seats of power as possible. And the tragedy is, they have ended up further from the heart of things and further from the heart of God.

Though John is out of sync and out of place, out on the edge, people are coming in droves to hear him. No doubt many come out of curiosity, though his preaching and call to repentance might very well hook them once they're out there. The religious authorities, the Pharisee and the Sadducees come out to hear this interesting religious figure.

What's interesting to me is that these two opposite poles of religion and politics come together in hearing John and opposing John, just as they will unite against Jesus. The Sadducees were the conservatives. They came out in their giant SUV's and trucks, wearing their red "Make Judea Great Again" caps, with their open carry swords and knives. At the same time, the Pharisees came out. They were the liberals of the day and they drove their Priuses, wearing their Patagonia fleece jackets and Blundstone boots bought at the Jerusalem REI Coop. Here they all are, arms linked together against John and against what he's preaching. This kingdom of heaven is threatening to those in power and if they feel their power is challenged, they'll fight tooth and nail to protect it.

Let me try to get at something of why people were coming out to hear John. First, Matthew says that John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist and lived on locusts and wild honey (3:4). While this sounds like he was an eccentric character to us, to the people of that time and place, they knew exactly what John's clothing and eating habits represented. He was a prophet in the Old Testament tradition, especially like Elijah. In I Kings 1:8, it says that Elijah was "a hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist." Plus, I Kings tells us that Elijah lived in the wilderness trusting God to feed him. So, when the people see John, they know exactly what's going on. This is a new Elijah.

Remember that Elijah did not die but was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. Jewish teaching was that the return of Elijah would signal the end of the world and that the Messiah was coming. It's why at Jewish Passover to this day, there is always a place set at the table for Elijah and the door is left open in case he arrives.

Furthermore, these famous words from the Old Testament from the prophet Malachi, are about Elijah: "See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble ... says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. ... See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes" (Malachi 4:1-5).

These are the closing words of the Old Testament. Prophets like Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, Joel, Habakkuk, and others, all spoke a word from God, and finally the prophet Malachi. Then 400 years of silence. Nothing. Not a word. 400 years of waiting and listening and watching. Then John the Baptist shows up in the wilderness dressed like Elijah and preaching like Elijah. The air around John is electric with possibility. People go out to hear him with the hair standing up on the arms. Is this Elijah? Is he the One?

John is standing as the climax of Old Testament prophetic faith. At the same time, with his call to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," he is using apocalyptic language which is not oriented toward the past but looks forward to the coming of the Messiah, not to the old ways of doing things but to the new kingdom of heaven that is coming.

So, when I say that John was out of sync and out of place and does not fit, again, it has little to do with his eccentricity and everything with him standing at

the juncture between the Old and the New. He is the pivot where everything is about to change. New Testament scholar Tom Long says, “All of human history swung on its hinges, the massive plates of cosmic time shifted under the surface, and the Day of God’s salvation was dawning” (*Matthew*, p. 25). Here is John embodying the old while pointing to the new. He is the hinge of history turning from the old way of death and domination to the new creation, the kingdom of heaven as it comes incarnated in Christ.

God is up to something new, and the people are not sure what, but they hunger and thirst for a word from God. Is the Messiah coming? Is the promised deliverance coming?

Former pastor Roger Paynter remembers when he came back here for the Austin Heights’ fifteenth anniversary. Some of you gathered at Kurth Lake for a retreat on a Saturday and talked about where Austin Heights would go next. Part of the conversation was the question, “Why keep going?”

Roger said that Steve Smith spoke up and said, “I will tell you what keeps me coming to this church. It may be strange to say but after 15 years of trying to figure out what it means to be church, I still get the feeling here, like nowhere else, that any minute now something is about to happen.”

That’s an Advent statement, an Advent frame of mind, and an Advent church. We are to be looking and watching and preparing. God is up to something new. Let’s get ready. And that’s why a lot of these people were going out to hear John.

John says get ready. And the way to get ready is to repent. Change your ways. Turn your life around. Start acting differently. Start unlearning old habits

and start learning new habits and start hanging around people who are doing the same and who help each other change, who support one another and hold each other accountable.

When John says, “the axe is laid to the root of the trees,” he is saying it’s time to get radical. Radical comes from the word which means root. God is getting to the root of our lives, so we will rethink and reorient and reorder how we’re living.

And the standard by which we start reordering our lives is God and the kingdom of heaven. Not how does my life stack up against my neighbors or colleagues or acquaintances? But how does God see my life?

My old teacher Fred Craddock used to say that we convince ourselves that God grades on the curve, but when we come into the presence of God, everything is different. It is not that we become nothing. It’s not that we are shamed. It is that all our pretensions, all our posturing, all of our excuses, all of our convincing ourselves that everything is okay, and everything is fine, in God’s presence we see that everything is not okay, and everything is not fine.

Glen Adsett was a missionary in China many years ago. After the Chinese Communist takeover, he and his family were under house arrest until one day the soldiers came and said, “You can return to America tomorrow. You can take only 200 pounds with you.” Adsett and his family had been in China for years, so they started going through all their stuff, all their keepsakes. 200 pounds. The family got into arguments over what to take and what to leave. Adsett and his wife and their two children trying to decide – what about this vase, the books, the typewriter, clothes? They got the scales and weighed everything and finally got it right on the dot – 200 pounds. The next day the soldiers came and said, “Are you

ready?” “Yes.” “Only 200 pounds. Did you weigh everything?” “Yes.” “Did you weigh the kids?” “No, we didn’t weigh the kids.” “Weigh the kids.” Suddenly everything else became unimportant.

John is at the hinge of history, this pivot point of the ages, but he is also saying that this is the hinge, the pivot point for each and every one of us. God is coming.

And John says, “Bear fruit that befits repentance.” The kingdom of heaven is impinging upon us and upon our time, everything is changing – the cosmos, the earth, the politics, and structures of our society, and how we fit into all of this. God is coming. How we relate to one another, how we’re married, how we do family, how we do church, how we vote, how we care for creation, how we work and what work we do, how we do health. And in my case, how I eat and live. Everything is being reoriented, therefore bear fruit that befits repentance.

Tom Long says that when an army of liberation sets free a prisoner of war camp, the prisoners respond by fleeing their cells and embracing their liberators. Bearing fruit worthy of repentance means that we start acting like we’re liberated instead of returning to our cells, putting our shackles back on after they’ve been removed, and continue to act like prisoners. Instead, John is saying that liberated prisoners act like free people (Long, *Matthew*, p. 29).

Part of the grace that comes from outside of us and liberates us to change and repentance, is that the grace of God in Christ helps us not just turn away from old ways that are killing us and killing our planet, it also starts giving us pictures of the New Creation. John does not just call for repentance, he also says that kingdom of heaven is at hand. We can turn away from Deathliness because we want to turn toward something deeper and better and truer that is Life-giving.

It is why we read Isaiah as part of the lectionary this morning. Isaiah gives us a picture of God's coming peaceable kingdom. "The 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. ... They 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 covers the sea" (Is. 11:6-9).

John tells us, it is time to join the kingdom of heaven that is coming. God frees us from fear and resentment, anger and violence – all the ways of Death and Domination and invites us and empowers us to join the Peaceable Kingdom. Sure, it will take some getting used to, and sure, we must practice it together in community, but come on.

Chuck was a firefighter in Suffolk, Virginia over 26 years. Like most firefighters he was tough, stubborn, set in his ways. They were fighting a fire at a Wal-Mart when he fell through the roof, landed among the tires and batteries. He was knocked out, but he regained consciousness, stumbled out the front door, and passed out again. He refused to go to the hospital, but they made him. Doctors said, "Mr. Goldsmith, you're the luckiest man alive." "Yeah," he said, I tried to tell them the fall didn't hurt me that much." "No," they said, "we're not talking about the fire. The tests we've run show you're months, perhaps weeks away from a heart attack or stroke that will probably kill you. But if you change your ways now, it might not be too late."

When he was discharged, his wife reached over, took the pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket and crushed them. "You're not going to need these anymore." He reached back behind her and pulled out another pack from the carton, opened it, and lit one up. "I've smoked for forty years and I'm not letting

any doctor steal all the joy of life from me.” She said, “We’re going to change the way we eat from now on.” He said, “Y’all can eat what you want, but I’ll be eating fried chicken.” He went home and sat in his recliner while she cooked his fried chicken with all the trimmings that were pleasing him to death. She called their son crying because his stubborn father refused to change even when he knew it was killing him.

She set the meal on the table and went into the den to call him to supper when she found Chuck sitting in his recliner holding a frame, tears streaming down his face. It was a picture of their first grandson, one-year old Duke. “I want to be here to see him grow up!” he said.

That night Chuck quit smoking. He started exercising, eating right. To everybody’s surprise, he retired from the fire department a year later, and then he and his wife served three stints as missionaries building houses and hospitals in Central America. Duke, the grandson, is nineteen.

We could say Chuck was saved by the grace of God, but it wasn’t the accident that saved his life, and it wasn’t the stern admonishment of a finger-wagging doctor, nor even the gentle nagging of a loving life partner. What finally turned his life around from his self-destruction was this: he saw a picture of a future he wanted to be part of.

John the Baptist invites us to be part of the future called the Peaceable Kingdom, the kingdom of heaven. God is doing something new; God in Christ is coming. The hair is standing up on my arms, and the air is electric with possibility. Get ready!

In the pre-Civil War South among slaves, word would go out through whispers and word of mouth, through stories and songs in church, echoing John the Baptist's words the slaves would sing:

*The Gospel train's a-coming,
I hear it's just at hand,
I hear the car wheels rumbling,
And rolling through the land. //
The fare is cheap, and all can go,
The rich and poor are there,
No second class aboard this train,
No difference in the fare. //
Git on board, little children,
Git on board, little children,
Git on board, little children,
There's room for many a more. //*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.