

**Advent 3, Year C**  
**December 16, 2018**  
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John the Baptist is a singular character in the Bible. He is the one who builds a bridge between the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament story of Jesus. John straddles that divide by embodying the call to proclaim the truth in candid, sometimes unforgiving language like his famous predecessor Elijah, while also declaring the Good News of the imminent arrival of Israel's long awaited Messiah. John is a challenge to embrace, for short of a Drill Sergeant we do not expect to hear such harsh language directed at us. **"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance."** Like a Drill Sergeant, John calls us to face what we might otherwise choose to ignore to our own peril. His mission is to save lives, not to be liked.

Several years ago, after my father had been in the hospital and had come home in very poor shape, my mother was caring for him. She died unexpectedly in her sleep, and my brother and I went to be with him. One of the first things on the calendar was a follow up appointment for my father with a new doctor. The doctor was concerned about both my dad's health and his possibly fragile emotional

state. Before seeing our father the doctor met with my brother Bruce and me, and asked how best to speak to him. Bruce and I both said, **'As bluntly as possible. He's an old Army guy and that is the only thing that works. Otherwise he won't take you seriously.'** The doctor nodded. Then we went in to the other room and the doctor said to our father, **"You need to eat and you need to move, or you will die."** That was blunt. He repeated himself and asked my father if he understood. Dad said yes. We went home and my father asked for lunch and ate it. Then he asked to go for a walk with my brother. Those were small, seemingly simple things, but they were the first steps toward doing what he needed to do to get well.

John the Baptist sounds much like that doctor. In his straight talk to the children of Israel he tells them that they cannot rely on being children of Abraham to save them, for God is ready to cut down those who do not bear good fruit. Their response was to ask the practical question, **"What then should we do?"** The advice John gives them is as simple and straightforward as what the doctor told my father: share, don't be greedy, and don't be a bully. Can it really be that easy? Evidently so, for we have to start with where we are in order to do better.

This Advent, as we once again await the coming of Jesus, I invite you to do what John the Baptist called people to do. Ask God what it is that you should do. Then watch and listen for the answer. If it seems too small and simple to be right, start there anyway, for one step leads to another, then another. If what John offers doesn't sound like Good News at first, perhaps it is because not everyone offers us the gift of the truth, especially when we might be quite content not to hear it. I leave you with the thoughts of American poet William Stafford, who captures well the ministry of those who, like John the Baptist, tell the truth for our sake:

**And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,  
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,  
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty  
To know what occurs but not recognize the fact...**

**For it is important that awake people be awake,  
Or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;  
the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—  
should be clear; the darkness around us is deep.**

Amen