

Revising the Past, Envisioning the Future
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 3:7-18
The Third Sunday of Advent, (Dec. 15) 2024
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There is old wisdom among the Akan people in what is now known as Ghana, called Sankofa. It is symbolized by a mythical bird pictured as flying forward with its head turned backwards. This wisdom is that the past serves as a guide for planning the future. The Akan people believed that there must be movement and new learning as time passes, but as this forward movement proceeds, the knowledge of the past must never be forgotten. Sankofa

John the Baptist is Sankofa in our Gospel readings during the Second and Third Sundays in Advent. He points to the coming Messiah while calling us to look backward, reminding us of how God worked in our past.

John is a living anachronism. He is dressed in clothing of the past, specifically just like the prophet Elijah, who lived eight centuries before. And it's not that he is what we might call a reenactor, someone who dresses up like an American Civil War soldier or someone who dresses up on the Fourth of July like Thomas Jefferson. John is not "dressing up" like a prophet. John is a prophet. He embodies and practices and lives the Old Testament. He is the past living in the present.

So, when John shows up in the middle of the wilderness preaching, he gets everyone's attention, not by his weirdness but by his embodying the presence of the past.

Over my many years as a pastor, one of the strangest things people have told me, but have told me so many times in so many places, that I take with the upmost seriousness, is that there have been times after a loved one's death, a father or mother or spouse, the surviving person comes to see me, a week later, a month later, sometimes several months later and tells me in hushed tones that they had a vision or a dream of the loved one who had died coming unexpectedly to them and reassuring them. Time and time again, I've heard, "He/she said to me, 'Everything is going to okay.'" And then usually, the person will say to me something like, "Do you think I'm crazy?"

My answer is, "No, I do not think you are crazy." Do I know what is going on? No. Is it psychological? Is it spiritual? Is the loved one really communicating with us from beyond? My answer is, "I don't know." But I do know I've heard these stories far too long not to take them seriously and I do believe there is much more to life and death than know or understand.

I bring this up, because John the Baptist appearing in the wilderness dressed as he is, preaching as he is, is less like an Old Testament reenactor and more like someone whom we loved, who died years ago, showing up in our present lives. He gets our attention. His presence is sobering and poignant. People get quiet. Their hearts get heavy, and everyone starts asking each other, "Is he real?" "Are we crazy?"

And what adds to the poignancy and power of John is that he is not saying, "Everything is going to be okay." He is saying, "You need to repent... You are to bear fruits worthy of repentance. Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

When we start talking about repentance, much of this we know, or at least we have heard before. Sometimes we think of repentance as an old-fashioned way of saying we need to make some mid-course adjustments. Our lives are changing, we're growing up, and we need to adjust. This is not what John is preaching.

Often, we tend to think of repentance as a kind of biblical, religious New Year's Resolution. It's time to put aside the ice cream, cut-back on the carbs, start walking every morning, and pray more often. But there is more to John's call than this.

Carl Jung, talked about growth from the first half of life to the second half. Jung wrote, "In the second half of life the necessity is imposed of recognizing no longer the validity of our former ideals but of their contraries. Of perceiving the error in what was previously our conviction, of sensing the untruth in what was our truth..."

Of sensing the untruth in what was our truth... What if part of the kind of repentance John preaches also involves sensing the truth in what we had considered untruth? Perhaps some of what is going on here is the recognition that our past is more complex than we have remembered, and that God and grace have been at work in our pasts more than we have been able to acknowledge before.

Last year my brother sent me a book called *Gamble in the Devil's Chalk* by Caleb Pirtle III. It is a recent history of the oil business in West Texas in a geologic formation called the Austin Chalk. The reason my brother sent it to me is that our geologist father, Clayton Childress, is in the book for about a page. Not much is said about him except when he is mentioned in connection with an oil man named Williams. Here is the quote: "Williams had known the geologist [my dad] since their boyhood days in the West Texas oil patch and had no reservations about

working with a man who, he remembered, was as honest as the day was long” (p.51).

I mention this because that one little sentence about my father’s character is a testimony about who he was. He was not only failings and foibles that I remember. He was also a man known for his honesty and integrity, and reading this was a reminder to me about his reputation.

Part of what John is doing in calling us to repentance is to call us to revise the past. Revising the past in this context is about learning to see the past with new eyes. Not, and this is important, “revisionist history” where we try to change history to suit our already settled views, but the opposite: change our views and change our lives to match our clearer vision of history. John is calling us to look at our past with new eyes, new vision, to re-vise. Often that means coming to terms with our family and systemic sin in ways we haven’t before – racism, misogyny, arrogance and violence, greed, and so on. It means coming to terms with our own failures and blind spots. We have to look at our darkness, our sin, and our failures clearly and honestly.

But that is not all. John is also calling us to look clear-eyed at the grace and goodness in our past. For example, I’m learning to view my own parents and family of origin with more generosity than I used to. It does not mean that I ignore or deny failures and mistakes and problems, but it also does not mean that my parents were only failures, mistakes, and problems. My father had integrity. My mother was incredibly intelligent and multi-talented who should have gone to college but did not because of old-fashioned views, lack of money, and probably more than a little fear. And my parents believed in reading books and thinking thoughts.

John calls us to revise the past. To re-vision, to see anew, before we dare to move ahead. Indeed, like the Sankofa bird, we're always looking back with fresh and truthful eyes as we move forward to the new future to which God is calling us.

The Southern writer, Eudora Welty wrote in her *One Writer's Beginnings* about the insights which can result when we go back and explore memories of experiences we thought we already fully understood. She writes, "Connections slowly emerge ... cause and effect begin to align themselves ... And suddenly a light is thrown back, as when a train rounds a curve, showing there has been a mountain of meaning rising behind you on the way you've come, is rising still (p. 90).

John wears the clothing of an old prophet; indeed, he is an old prophet who embodies the history of God's people, to proclaim all that God has done before, which we did not fully see – a mountain of meaning rising behind us. All that we did not fully understand. All that we did not fully believe. And all that is converging at this moment, so we can begin to see that Christ, the Messiah, is coming into our world, into our lives.

Repentance is learning to come to terms with all of that, and then to start living differently. When John says we are to bear fruit worthy of repentance he means, "I want to see some changed behavior!" The Greek word *metanoia* means to turn around, to reorient oneself in another direction. It means to receive a new start altogether.

For the new start to be more than a temporary blip on the screen, it must be embodied and practiced. Sometimes the insight and motivation comes first and then we change our ways but sometimes, we have to change our ways first, then the motivation and insight catches up. Most of the time both are going on at once.

And John says, “Bear fruit that befits repentance.” God in Christ and the kingdom of heaven is impinging upon us and upon our time, everything is changing – the cosmos, the earth, the systems and structures of our world, and how we fit into all of this. God is coming. How we see our pasts and how we relate to one another in the present, how we’re married, how we do family, how we do church, how we love, how we care for creation, how we care for people in need and welcome them, how we work, and what work we do. Everything is being reoriented. We discover more grace in the past than we saw before but we also see the need for change and conversion. There is constant revisioning and envisioning.

When Thomas Jefferson was president of the United States, he read the New Testament and was not impressed with what he read. The Jesus that Jefferson read was too complex, too cluttered by what Jefferson considered to be fables. Jefferson was looking for a Jesus who was a simple moralist who taught “pure deism.” In short, Jefferson wanted a Jesus just like himself. Religion scholar Stephen Prothero says, “Jefferson sat down in the White House, razor in hand, and began to cut and paste his own Bible.” Prothero says, when he did so, “the American Jesus was born” (Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*, p. 13).

Part of the challenge for us is how do we know what the real Jesus looks like? And when he comes will we recognize him? We are not likely to take our modern razors/computers and cut and paste our own New Testament with only what we like in it, but like most people, we see what we want to see. A priest told writer Anne Lamott, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do” (Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, p. 21).

Let me make a simple suggestion. Return to your old Bible, or better, get yourself a new translation, and start reading it (By the way, start with one of the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. Since we are beginning Year C of the Lectionary, start with Luke.) Allow the old Scriptures to speak to you anew. Don't read it like you remember reading it but allow it to come at you from new and different perspectives, which call you to new and maybe demanding possibilities in your life. Come back to Sunday morning Bible study here where we read the Bible together and ask questions. When you read at home, learn to read with an imagined partner sitting beside you and see how their perspective might change what you see and read. For example, when we read Luke 1 and 2 these next two weeks, the stories of Mary discovering she is about to have a baby, and the story of great-with-child Mary and Joseph trying to get back to their hometown to make sure they're counted by the tax rolls and census takers, how might someone who is a refugee from another country hear and read these stories differently than we do? How might a family from say, Central America, whom we might host in our Pilgrim House (Casa Peregrina) help us read these old stories differently? Mary and Joseph become Maria and Jose, trying to dodge a paranoid tyrant and his state police, while having a baby in a back alley.

Or how might have Thomas Jefferson changed and his views of Jesus and slavery changed, had he read his New Testament with Sally Hemmings at his side or in the company of his many slaves?

This is repenting and bearing fruit that befits repentance.

We are entering an Advent world of tyrants, and state police determining who is documented and who will be deported, climate change, billionaires making decisions about national and international policies which affect young refugee

couples with a newborn baby and all the rest. Many of us are listening to old John tell us about our old faith, which we are discovering is strangely new.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote while he was in a Nazi prison about the hope of Advent. He said, “One waits, hopes, does this, that, or the other – things that are really of no consequence – the door is shut and can only be opened *from the outside*.

John the Baptist tells us that God in Christ comes and opens the door from the outside. We are called to step through that door to the new that Christ offers. We do not know for sure what is outside the door except it will not be boring.

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