

John the Baptist and a Terrible Wonder
Luke 3:1-18
December 8, 2013

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene – during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God’s salvation.’ ” John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” “What should we do then?” the crowd asked. John answered, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.” Tax collectors also came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?” “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely – be content with your pay.” The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Today we celebrate the second Sunday in Advent. Advent means “to come” and it is a season of preparation. We take time out in the church year to prepare for the coming of Christ.

In the world, this is a very physical time. A time for dragging out the Christmas decorations, putting up the lights, buying gifts, sending out cards. With these things, the world is asking us to prepare for Christmas. But in the church, we do something different. In the church, we prepare to meet Jesus. And the way the church has done this for centuries is by having you meet John – John the Baptist. A voice on the edge of the wilderness.

Every Gospel writer includes John and every time John appears he points you to Jesus. John gathers Old Testament prophecies and visions of the future and holds them

together in a way that leads you to the Lord. And the Jesus John brings you is not the Jesus we are familiar with. He is not the gentle Jesus, embracing the children, enfolding them in his soft flowing robes. He is not the sentimental Jesus, looking off into the distance, bathed in soft light, his face all aglow. He is not the laughing Jesus, with his head thrown back as if you had just told him a good joke. For John, it's a different story.

John comes among us like an unwelcome guest at dinner. When he sits next to you, he smells bad. It's the distinct smell of smoke. He smells like someone who has just escaped from a great fire. You don't ask him about it because you don't want to know. But his eyes tell the story. His eyes are wild. Filled with visions of destruction and flames.

The fire he knows hasn't happened yet, but it's about to come. It's a raging of almighty wrath upon our world and our worship, refining the righteous, destroying the wicked. The axe is already laid to the root of the tree. His winnowing fork is in his hand and he's going to clear the threshing floor and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire.

No wonder you won't find John in king's palaces or dressed in fine clothes or at fancy dinners. What he has seen causes him to value everything differently and so he stands on the edge of the wilderness and calls for you to come.

While his eyes are wild with the future, his clothing is a memory of the past. Animal skins, like Elijah, dressed like a prophet fresh from the wilderness where he has seen God. John knows the God who can touch the top of a mountain and make it burst into holy flame. The who can God can sustain people for forty years feeding them with the bread of angels or who can annihilate them in a moment, sending fiery serpents that bite, and sting, and kill. This God is anything but tame, approachable, gentle, sentimental, enfolding children in his arms.

And so John comes. His eyes see into the future. His clothing looks like the past. But his words are all wrapped up in your present. He tells you to prepare for the coming of this God. Turn away from your sin and prepare for Jesus. Notice that John doesn't say, "prepare for Christmas." No, he says "prepare for Jesus." And there's a difference. It's the difference between preparing for a day and preparing for a person.

I've known people who are great at preparing for Christmas. They can get the house cleaned, decorated, and in order – for a day. They can get their busy schedule and their hectic life, quieted – for a day. They can even get their best game on, their relationship with their good-for-nothing son-in-law and his "nothing but trouble son from a previous marriage, who better not go to the fridge and get another beer," they can even get that in order.

They can be cordial, hospitable, possibly even Christian, yes, they can do that – for a day. Because when you prepare for a day, you are only getting ready for 24 hours. It will be here and then gone and then life can return to normal. But it's different when you prepare for a person. Especially when that person is not here and then gone, but

coming to stay. Coming to invite you into his kingdom and use you, your words, your thoughts, your deeds, in his never-failing plan to save this whole fallen world.

Getting ready for that person is different because when that person comes and comes to stay, your whole life changes. Your moral messiness, your blinded busyness, your broken relationships, these things need to change and change for good. Why? Well, consider the person who is coming.

Notice how John describes this one who is to come. This is not the gentle Jesus. This is not a God of quiet moments around a Christmas tree. And this is not the sentimental Jesus. This is not a God who says, "Aw, don't worry about your sin. Everybody does it. I'm just glad that you're here."

John says, "After me will come one more powerful than me." Jesus will not be more gentle, more understanding, more tolerant. He will be more powerful. Where John baptized with water, this one will baptize with the Spirit. And in the Gospel of Luke, we see the terror and the wonder of the power of Jesus.

There is terror in his power. Think of how Jesus appears in Luke. When Jesus comes, he enters a synagogue and teaches. After his teaching suddenly you hear a voice crying out. It's the not a human voice but the voice of an evil spirit crying out – and there, in the middle of worship, Jesus declares war on Satan (Lk 4 31-35).

When people who are sick are brought to him, instead of speaking of the sickness, he speaks of the soul. Wherever he goes, life suddenly breaks open so that one sees sin instead of sickness, an assault on demonic powers in the midst of worship. There is terror in his power.

And there is wonder. Just as quickly as he appears with power over sin and the devil, so too, and just as quickly his power disappears in suffering. He is betrayed by one of his own. Brutalized by Roman soldiers and hung on a tree to die. His disciples anticipate a display of his power and glory, but what they get is a dead man hanging on a cross.

And there, on the cross, abandoned by his people, abandoned by his God, this one, who is stronger than John, dies and the terrible wonder is that he dies for what we have done. Our moral messiness. Our blinded busyness. Our broken relationships have broken the body of Jesus.

Here is the power of God made known in weakness. He is the only one strong enough to endure your eternal damnation for sin. He bears the wrath, the anger, the fury of God, and leaves you with a word of promise: "You are forgiven."

This one who suffered the punishment of sin, rises and rules over all things for you. He brings you into his kingdom and uses you in the never-ending rule of his love until the day when he comes again. He will return from the heavens and bring about a new creation. His kingdom will never pass away.

So, what are you doing for Christmas? Are you going over to your fiancé's; beginning a new Christmas tradition with his or her family? Are your relatives coming into town? Perhaps you are planning a long trip home, looking forward to seeing your sister, the first time since she told you about the cancer. Whatever you are doing, when it comes to Christmas, don't forget John. Because John brings us Jesus.

John tells you to prepare, not for a day but for a person. He stands here with wild eyes and strange clothing so you prepare not for a sentimental moment holding candles in a dark church singing Silent Night, but so you prepare for eternity. John prepares you to meet Jesus and this Jesus has prepared an eternity for you.

Regardless of what you are doing for Christmas, John reminds you of what God is doing. He is tearing apart the heavens and coming into this world. He has washed you with water, baptized you in the Spirit, and he is coming for you.

You've seen what he does. He can use the words of a hymn in the middle of worship to declare war on the devil. He can turn a concern about sickness into a concern about the soul. He is wild and strange and awesome and mighty. He can disappear in weakness leaving you trusting in this crucified one.

Trusting that in his weakness, there is power. Trusting that in his promise, there is fulfillment. Trusting that in his dying, there is love, a love that is stronger than death – even though everything around you tells you otherwise.

If this vision fills you with fear and love, terror and wonder, then you have come to the edge of the wilderness. If your eyes are wide open with terror and wonder at the rule of God in Jesus, then John the Baptist has left you in the same place as the people of his day. And his encouragement to you is the same as his encouragement to them – "Prepare for the coming of the Lord."