

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

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Matthew 3:1-12

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Service for the Lord's Day

It's good to be back with you, and back from my sabbatical. I haven't had the opportunity to do so publicly yet, so I want to take this opportunity now to express my gratitude for the time that you gave me for rest and renewal and study and for reconnection with my family. It was very valuable to me, and I enjoyed the lack of structure for a time, but it also made me look forward to returning to the routine, if you can call it that, of congregational ministry. And so here I am, back with you, and jumping right in during the Advent and Christmas season when everything is so festive!

And though I realize I have preached many times about not rushing the season, I have to admit that I am enjoying listening to Christmas music, both sacred and secular, and seeing Christmas lights go up around town, and receiving Christmas cards, and anticipating spending time with family, and giving gifts and the like. It really is my favorite time of year.

Which is why I wasn't so happy when John the Baptist showed up in the lectionary this week. John the Baptist, you'll remember, is an odd figure. He's a wild sort of man, described as wearing clothes made of camel's hair and surviving on locusts and wild honey. He serves as an important figure, though, as a hinge, an intersection, between old and new. He's dressed like the prophets of old, but he is ushering in a whole new reality.¹ You'll remember also that John the Baptist is the cousin of Jesus, and his contemporary. So here, when John speaks of preparation, he's preparing for the advent of Jesus' earthly ministry, not his birth.

And so when John the Baptist shows up, with his strange ways, not even focusing on the baby Jesus, then he has the audacity to start saying things like, "*Repent!*" and to call people, even people who are religious professionals, "*You brood of vipers!*" Who does he think he is, after all, to interrupt the charm of this season with a call to repentance? John the Baptist a prophet with a scorched earth kind of message. Tear it all down. Clear the path. Throw it into the fire. Wow. That is sort of hardcore.

The repentance John is calling people to isn't about just trying to do a little better—eat fewer sausage balls or less pound cake at Christmastime, or about trying to reign in your spending by only buying your kids three presents because that's all Jesus got from the wisemen. That's all well and good, but that's not the kind of repentance John the Baptist is calling people to. He's talking about a complete shift from old to new, a complete change in direction. He's talking about tearing the whole thing down, and he does that by challenging their very identity. "Who do you think you are?" John says to them and to us. "*Do 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.*"

Identity. John is saying to us that any appeal to special status based on our past is meaningless. When it comes to discipleship, John is telling us what doesn't matter—tradition, a sense of dignity, our family and bloodline, nationality, self-righteousness, anything that gives us

¹ See Thomas G. Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 25.

an insider status—all of this was caught up in the phrase “children of Abraham.” And none of it matters.

Now this is a difficult message for a lot of us to take on any given day, but it is probably more difficult this time of year. This is a time of year that is full up with tradition. And family. Lots of us are really proud of our families, and this is the time of year we really identify with family, or we point back with nostalgia to memories about the simple faith of our grandparents. And if we’re really being honest with ourselves, with all the opportunities for giving and serving, there’s some self-righteousness built into this season, too.

At our staff meeting this week, our devotional came from Will Willimon, a preacher and theologian, a bishop in the United Methodist Church, and former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. He wrote this while he was serving in that capacity. A portion of the devotional goes like this:

“We love Christmas because, as we say, Christmas brings out the best in us. Everyone gives on Christmas, even the stingiest among us, even the Ebenezer Scrooges. Charles Dickens’ story of Scrooge’s transformation has probably done more to form our notions of Christmas than St. Luke’s story of the manger. Whereas Luke tells us of God’s gift to us, Dickens tells us how we can give to others. A Christmas Carol is more congenial to our favorite images of ourselves. Dickens suggests that down deep, even the worst of us can become generous, giving people. Yet I suggest we are better givers than getters, not because we are generous people but because we are proud, arrogant people. The Christmas story—the one according to Luke, not Dickens—is not about how blessed it is to be givers but about how essential it is to see ourselves as receivers. We prefer to think of ourselves as givers—powerful, competent, self-sufficient, capable people whose goodness motivates us to employ some of our power, competence and gifts to benefit the less fortunate. Which is a direct contradiction of the biblical account of the first Christmas. There we are portrayed not as the givers we wish we were but as the receivers we are... The first word of the church, a people born out of so odd a nativity, is that we are receivers before we are givers. Discipleship teaches us the art of seeing our lives as gifts. That’s tough because I would rather see myself as a giver. I want power—to stand on my own, take charge, set things to rights, perhaps to help those who have nothing. I don’t like picturing myself as dependent, needy, empty-handed.”²

The question John the Baptist prompts us to ask ourselves is, “Who do we think we are?” And we could try to blame this challenge to our identity on John the Baptist’s character, and his peculiarities, and his wild ways of living. Eating weird food and wearing weird clothes. Until we remember that these kind of prophetic words come out of Jesus’ mouth just a few chapters later. The infant Jesus that we are cooing over now is the same one who will say, by the tenth chapter of Matthew: *“Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”³* Jesus is not so cute anymore.

² William Willimon, *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY: 2001, p. 144-145, 147.

³ Matthew 10:34-38, NRSV.

Now, please don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting we abandon our families this Christmas. Or bring the sword. But what this uncomfortable interruption by John the Baptist reminds us is that a picture perfect Norman Rockwell Christmas is not the same thing as the radical transformation of the world that happened when God entered in the person of Jesus Christ. And I'm not sure how it happens, but somehow, we get the two things confused. I've told you this before, but I remember someone telling me that they didn't come to Christmas Eve worship because it was important for them to spend time with their family—and wasn't that what Christmas was all about, anyway.

Now, I also realize as I talk about warm family memories and delight at spending time together over the holidays that for some of us in this room that is not a reality. Some of us are separated from our families, or are dreading being together with our families. Some of us are outsiders in our own families or look back on a past that is anything but warm and nostalgic. And for those who don't feel like they can point to solid family trees or who feel pain when they consider their own histories, John the Baptist's words to tear it all down may just come as good news. That God will use who God will use, and insider status doesn't matter. So whether your past tells you that you are a brilliant success or an utter failure. None of it is anything. And whether you are the most popular or the weirdest person in the room, it doesn't matter. None of it is anything. And whether your thoughts of family bring joy or heartache. None of it is anything.

But why? Why all this scorched earth talk? What is this all about? For John the Baptist, it is because he knows exactly who he is and exactly who Jesus is. And he doesn't get the roles confused. His role is always, always, to point to Jesus. John himself says this towards the end of our text. *"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."* John's role has long been understood as one who points to Jesus. In fact, if you google images of paintings of John the Baptist, you will find that the classical image of him typically has him pointing to Christ in some manner. Sometimes to Jesus himself, sometimes to the cross, sometimes to a lamb. But almost always pointing away from himself, in order to point to Christ.

Where in your and my life, and where in our common life do we need to clear a path. Where do we need to straighten things out. Maybe we need to chop some things down, or even burn the whole thing down. So that we can reveal Jesus. So that our lives can point to Jesus. What's standing in the way. Where does that need to happen for us. That's the repentance John the Baptist is calling us to. It's a question that gets at our very core.

Who do I think I am? Who do you think you are? The answer is the same for all of us. In Christ you are a new creation. The birth of Christ promises us radical newness, a radical re-orientation of our lives. Together we wait for a new heaven and a new earth. And while we wait, we have one job. With John the Baptist, we are called to point to Jesus. To point away from ourselves and toward Jesus. And so, in a world that sometimes confuses nostalgia and tradition for discipleship, what could point to Jesus better than a little repentance at Christmastime? And in a world that rewards insider status what could point to Jesus better than a recognition that insider status is meaningless? And in a world full of self-congratulatory self-righteousness what could point to Jesus better than a recognition of our complete dependence on him? What could be a clearer sign than that?

Amen.