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Hudson UMC
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Who is the Messiah?

Prayer for Enlightenment

O Lord, we pray, speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and in the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the thoughts that we form. Speak, O Lord, for your servants listen. Amen.

This may only be the second Sunday of Advent, but I am already over Christmas. Like everyone else, I get caught up in the spirit of the holiday season--the shopping, the baking, the decorating, the parties--while simultaneously trying to hold a quiet space for the season of Advent. Some days it feels like a losing battle: even in church, there are people itching to sing "O Come All Ye Faithful," and it is only December 7th.

So right when I (& we) are all starting to feel overwhelmed by this soon-to-arrive holiday...Who shows up? John the Baptist...waist deep in the muddy Jordan, dressed in nothing but skins and a belt, ranting like a street preacher:

Repent! For the kingdom of heaven has come near!

If, like me, you are feeling a little stressed out, it is tempting to try and slip past John unnoticed. But that's impossible. Every year on the second Sunday of Advent we hear about John the Baptist.

The four Gospels offer a wonderful variety of narratives:
Luke gives us shepherds in Bethlehem.
Matthew has the magi bringing gifts from afar.
Mark and John have no stories of Jesus birth.

The first thing they all agree on is John the Baptist.

In all four Gospels John is in the same place wearing the same clothes with the same message:
Repent, for the kingdom of heaven draws near! Prepare the way of the Lord.

John the Baptist is significant because he is the last in the line of prophets.
Although he does not call himself a prophet, John is the embodiment of the whole tradition.

He is dressed like Elijah.
He sounds like Isaiah.
He stands in the Jordan River...a river that separates the wilderness and the Promised Land.
Indeed John is a prophet.

John is the bridge with the prophetic tradition.
John has come to tell the world that Jesus is the branch that grows from the root of Jesse.

Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise.
Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Isaiah wrote that a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. Jesse was King David's father, but it was much more than simple ancestry. It was not just the bloodline that was important.
It was all that King David accomplished in his life and reign.

King David had united the twelve tribes of Israel. The people of Israel became a nation. Under King David, they became stronger than they had ever been.
King David was a great military leader who brought peace to the people of Israel by conquering his enemies.
These were the best of times for the people of Israel under King David.

I am convinced that the people and the religious leaders of the Jesus' time believed that this new "shoot of Jesse" would be a great, conquering king, leading armies to victory over enemies. In other words, this new messiah would rid the land of the oppressive Romans and bring peace and freedom to the country once again.

THAT's what people wanted: Peace, freedom from oppression. And very few people can envision Peace without violence. If want to have Peace, the thinking goes, we must forcibly get rid of the bad guys!

Into the swirl of desire for a Messiah and oppression by the Romans, comes a character named John the Baptist.

Matthew tells us that the people of Jerusalem and ALL JUDEA were going out to him. He even seems to have attracted the attention of the Temple authorities. We are told that MANY Pharisees and Sadducees were also present...the Greek is unclear if they were actually there to be baptized or if they were there on a scouting mission.

John, however, appears to have had a bit of a problem with these religious leaders since he calls them a "brood of vipers."

Not a very popular thing to say, especially when we remember who his father was.
John's father was a Temple priest.

And not just any Temple priest, but THE aged temple priest who claimed to have been visited by an angel predicting the birth of his son.

Perhaps that's why the religious authorities had come; they wanted to see what Zechariah's son was doing in the wilderness; was he preaching the "right stuff" or was there a reason to be concerned?

My guess is that after John called them "vipers," they high-tailed it back to Jerusalem and had a word with his father, Zechariah.

John is not known as much for his "brood of vipers" statement, his big word seems to be "Repent."

Not just “repent,” but REPENT!!

I can almost hear him shouting at the top of his lungs, hammering his fist on the pulpit!

His message seemed to have considerable appeal because it attracted a great many people.

It makes me wonder: did people back then hear the word *metanoia*, which is translated as “repent” in the same way as we hear it today?

OUR inclination is hear it as being sorry – feeling sorry – for our sins.

But the word “metanoia” doesn’t mean that. The word conveys, a 'change-of-mind,' but the NT use of the word is deeply influenced by the (Hebrew Scripture’s) notion of 'turning' to God as an 'about face,' a change in direction, a return to walking with God.

Repentance involves far more than intellectual change or remorse; it entails a new or renewed relationship with God that transforms all the dimensions of one's life...It’s more than a "change of mind" because one can change one's mind, but not change one's life. It means that one re-aims their life to follow a different way with a different mind and a different heart.

John himself had repented. Remember that as the son of a priest, he, too, was in line to become a priest. Yet, he seems to have given up the ways of the temple priest for a vital relationship with God in the wilderness.

John calls for others to do the same.

John was a prophet pointing to the coming of the Messiah...a new way of living...a new life.

Interestingly, I find that the Messiah that John announced did indeed arrive, but I don’t think he was who John expected. John wanted the Messiah that others around him also wanted.

John wanted a Messiah who would judge between good and evil...instead John got Jesus who says to the woman caught in adultery, “I do not condemn you.”

John wanted a Messiah who would overthrow the cursed Romans...instead John got Jesus who heals the Roman centurion’s daughter and was later crucified by the Romans.

What kind of Jesus did John want?

He wanted Jesus to kick butt, to clean house, to call down fire-and-judgment, payback-and-destruction. He wanted what many Jews of the time wanted...a great leader who would oust the Romans.

The Messiah that John wanted is not the Jesus that he got.

Which raises the same question for us?

What do we look for in the Messiah?

Who do we think he will be?

It seems that Jesus the Messiah was not what John the Baptist or the religious leaders expected...or wanted.

This morning we hear the beginning of the story in which God acts decisively.
Not always in the way we expect, but it is God at work, nonetheless.

We hear about how God sends his Son, not in military might or political prowess, but as a baby to poor parents.

Instead of great battles won and political intrigue in the palace, we hear the beginnings of a story of a child who grows up and changes the world...one heart at a time.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Repent...live a new life because of God's great love for us all.

Repent...Thanks be to God. Amen.