

Highway Beautification

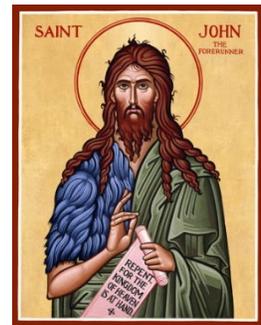
Rev. Dr. Michael Piazza

The Second Sunday of Advent, December 9, 2018

Isaiah 40:1-11/ Luke 1:5-25

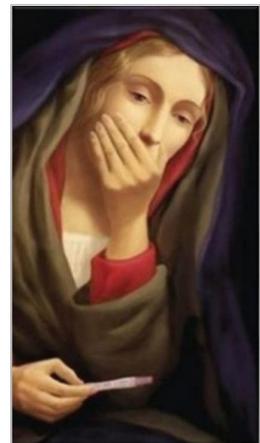
Several years ago, on this Sunday of Advent, a member of my staff preached on the Gospel lesson that we read this morning. After the service, she and I stood at the door greeting people.

That morning, I spoke to a young man who was visiting who said that he really enjoyed the service. Then he lowered his voice and said, "I enjoyed the sermon this morning, but who was that John fellow she kept talking about?"



I don't want to make that same mistake, so, just in case you don't know, John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin and the one sent to prepare the way for the Messiah to come. John was Advent incarnate. His life and ministry were the season during which people prepared their heart for the coming of the Christ.

Last Sunday we heard how Gabriel came to John's father, Zechariah, to tell him that, although he and his wife, Elizabeth, were quite old, they were going to have a son whom they were to name John. Now, this story is told as if that was good news, but, because Zechariah was dubious, the angel made him silent for the next nine months. That seems unfair. I probably would have questioned the message, too, and Mary greeted a similar revelation with the question, "How can this be?" and she wasn't struck dumb.



As I thought about this, though, I remembered that Zechariah was old. Although some might think pregnancy is good news, I invite those of us who are in our 60s, 70s, or 80s to imagine what it might be like to have a baby at that age. I don't know about you, but I'm too old to be chasing a two-year-old through the legs of camels and goats.



Perhaps Gabriel made it impossible for Zechariah to speak because he knew what Zechariah was liable to say. Still, Elizabeth and Zechariah managed and apparently did something right with their son John because he was fearless about telling the truth, no matter whose toes he stepped on.

It's a good thing John was a prophet, not a pastor ...

Fred Craddock, who was my preaching professor, had a great sermon in which he asked the rhetorical question, "Have You Heard John Preach?" Dr. Craddock said:

*Have you heard John preach? He was an oddity. He had long hair, and when I say he had long hair, I mean it wasn't like a young businessman with a little ponytail. John **never** cut his hair. He had a long beard, not a neat beard like some of you have. I mean, he had **never** trimmed his beard. And he was strange. He dressed in an unusual way—camel's hair and a leather band around the waist. And his food—he never went home with anybody for lunch, and I'm sure no one accepted his invitation to share his locust and honey.*



Have you ever heard John preach? He was no chef offering up fancy dishes. He broke the bread of God with his bare hands and said, "Eat it and live." He was no politician trying to make "yes" sound like "no" and "no" sound like "yes." He said, "The judge is coming, and I'm here to serve subpoenas." He was no candle in the sanctuary, he was a prairie fire with a stump as his pulpit; the sun and moon and stars as chandeliers; and the Jordan River as his baptistry.

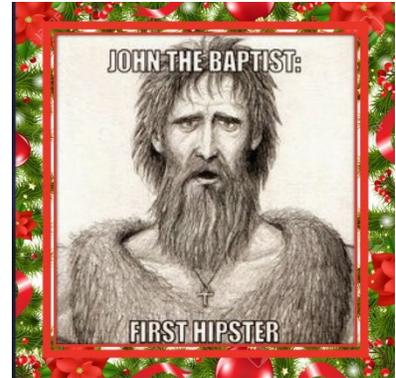


Did you ever hear him preach? It was kind of frightening. ... What's frightening about listening to John is that he puts you in the presence of God. And that's what everybody wants, and that's what nobody really wants.

Did you ever hear John preach? He said, "God's Messiah is coming. The kingdom is at the door. God's Messiah is right outside." What a thrilling thing! What a terrifying thing. Oh, of course, most thought it was going to be the cure for everything, but their position in life was going to be turned upside. They believed, "Where the Messiah is, there is no misery." Instead John came to tell them, "Where there is misery, there is the Messiah."

Did you ever hear John preach? If you haven't, you will. Because the only way to Nazareth is through the desert. Well, that's not really true. You can get to Nazareth without going through the desert. But you won't find Jesus there."

What Dr. Craddock was saying is this is why you don't see John on the front of Christmas cards. John came to prepare the way by calling us to change our direction; to repent and prepare to meet our Maker.



I've been thinking that it might be time to scrap the preparation of Advent and move from Thanksgiving right to singing Christmas Carols. Advent hymns are in a minor key anyway. The only trouble is we spend a whole lot more of our lives in Advent than in Christmas. We spend our days torn between anxiety and hope; always preparing and waiting; living between the dreaming and the coming true.

Even for people of faith, life is much more Advent than Christmas. This is true for our personal lives and for our common cultural lives. We all seem more bound in Advent than Christmas; more about hopes and fears than Gloria's and hallelujahs.

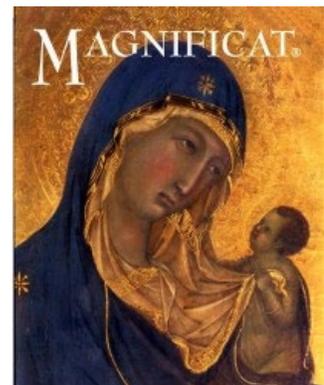
- Many of our parents thought the election of John F. Kennedy had brought about a time of Camelot, but that was not to be.
- We heard the splendor and majesty of Dr. King's dream for a new world waiting to be born and had hope, but then there was Memphis.
- Remember how it felt that night in 2008 when we elected our first African-American president? Even Republican hearts swelled with pride for how far America had come. For a brief shining moment, we thought it was Christmas, but it has turned out to be more like Advent.

Hope is still alive, but the wind blows cold against the flame. It is Advent. It is more John's call to repent, than Jesus' offer of graceful life.

In the Gospel lesson, Luke begins by listing the political leaders of the day: Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate the Governor, Herod and his brother Philip. He adds to the list those who were serving as high priests, Annas and Caiaphas. Luke does this to place the timeline of what was taking place firmly in this backwoods region, but this is more than just a calendar note. Luke wants us to recognize the courage of John.

He came calling for change in an age in which the political and religious leaders were not very open to voices calling out from the wilderness. Unfortunately, the church has romanticized John's role. We have shaved him, cut his hair, and dressed him in a suit and tie. We've tamed him, civilized him, domesticated his message, and made it palatable for defenders of the status quo.

The church is no longer the revolutionary change agent that Mary sang about and that John preached about. We love to sing the "Magnificat" this time of year, but we avoid Mary's words about God casting down the mighty and lifting up the lowly; filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty.



Instead of "turning the world around," we prefer to tinker at the edges, improve things incrementally. Rather than address the causes of poverty, we collect food and blankets for the poor because it makes us feel less guilty.

That is fine, but, according to John and Mary, it is not enough. South American Archbishop Dom Helder Camara once said:

When I feed the poor, you call me a saint. When I ask, why are they poor, you call me a Communist.

Justice and mercy are two sides of the same coin. John came to prepare a highway for our savior, but he is not satisfied with planting wild flowers on the shoulders. He fills in the valleys, lowers the hills, makes crooked places straight, and rough places smooth. He is not just decorating the sides of the road.

If that doesn't terrify us, then we miss the point: This reconstruction project is supposed to happen in our lives if we truly are to be prepared for Christ to come to us.

Perhaps even more terrifying, we are the ones called to be preparers of the Way for Christ to come to others, especially those too long and too often excluded from the family.

During this season, people come to church looking for a baby, but the readings assigned are about John the Baptist. I'm sure John was a precious baby, but the adult John is a prophet screaming at us to repent before Christ comes.

In the movie "Life or Something Like It," Angelina Jolie plays a television reporter named Lanie Kerrigan. She has the perfect job, the perfect boyfriend, and, most importantly, the perfect hair. Then, one day, she is assigned to do a story on a Seattle street person named Jack who is something of a prophet. Jack stands on a sidewalk downtown telling the future. Lanie resents having to do this story, especially with this particular cameraman.



Jack predicts a win for the Seahawks, that it will hail the next day, and that Lanie will die the next Thursday. Lanie's life is turned upside down when the prophet's first two predictions inexplicably come true. In the face of her impending death, her life doesn't seem so perfect after all.

An encounter with a prophet can ruin your entire day. They call us to prepare for the coming of Christ. Advent is the time the church sets aside to do this preparing, so we decorate, buy gifts, and get ready for Christmas. If you think that is all this means, you haven't heard John preach. He is trying to warn us that Jesus came to them, and he also is coming again for us.

It may not be next Thursday, but we should be prepared, just in case it is.