

The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller
Year A, Advent 2, Matt. 3:1-12: 4 December 2016
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

If you were here a few weeks ago, you may recall that I told a story about my trip to Israel as a young adult. During that trip, I came to the astonishing realization of how at least some Israeli Jews relate to time. We were separated by 3000 years from a Biblical event that happened at a spring on the West bank and, as far as our Jewish guide was concerned, it seemed that event could have happened yesterday. But this was not only an observation about how she perceived time. It also had to do with how she related the event to itself, which was recorded in the Hebrew Bible. She was a woman who knew the scriptures, and, for her, scripture was not simply a story about events that happened in the distant past—in these events she had found her *own* story as a Jew and as a woman.

It turns out that her experience is not that uncommon for many practicing Jews, as well as for Christians and Muslims. We who see ourselves as part of the Abrahamic traditions are “people of the Book,” people who find their collective and individual identities in large part by pouring over lines of text written many, many centuries ago. As Episcopalians, we may not fully appreciate this intense study of scripture—let’s just acknowledge that we are better known for our concentration on liturgy than for our study of Bible—but I mention it here to help us get into the mindset of the Jewish people living in first century Palestine. What would *motivate* Jews in Jerusalem to walk—yes, to *walk*, at least most of them—the 20-30 dry, dusty miles into the Judean desert to see and hear John the Baptist or, perhaps as better translated, John the Baptizer?

It wasn't just because he was an odd sort of novelty, wearing clothes of camel hair and eating locusts and wild honey, for based on their experience he actually may not have been all *that* odd. And it wasn't just because he was a good preacher, though he was indeed viewed as a very good preacher by those around him. And it certainly wasn't because they liked the abuse he heaped on them in his preaching. No, it was because they had "read, studied, and inwardly digested" their own scriptures. They were anticipating John's arrival because of what had been prophesied 500 years before from Babylon and written in a scroll that we today call Isaiah. Because they know Isaiah's prophecy intimately, they were intently watching and waiting for just such a person as John to appear. And, like my Israeli guide, the fact that this prophecy was written 500 years earlier mattered not at all to them. Their very lives were defined and ordered by scripture, and, perhaps more importantly, their hope as a people was focused on the words written in that scroll. And so, they walked the 20-30 miles into desert to see and hear John because they believed they might be seeing prophecy fulfilled before their eyes. And they did.

John did not just preach his sermons, standing rooted behind a pulpit like I do. Instead, like Jesus himself would later do, John *performed* them. He acted out his message just to be sure his listeners wouldn't miss his point, and he invited those same listeners to participate with him. He went into the desert and invited those who came to hear him into the desert as well. Once there, he urged them to "turn around," that is, to repent, and return with him by passing through the waters of baptism in the Jordan River. He was perhaps inviting the Jews to reenact the Exodus with him, confessing their sins as they came through the river; or, perhaps, with the reference to Isaiah, he is telling them that *this* is the way to

prepare for the return of God to end their 500 years of exile in their own land. He also might have been intending both interpretations. In any case, one way or another, John is claiming that, with the coming of the kingdom, Israel's story is coming to a climax, a sort of ending of the old way and a beginning of the new. "The kingdom of heaven [which is Matthew's pious way to avoid saying the name of God] has come near." This was John's main message, and though the Jews who came out to see and hear him wouldn't have understood the word, they would understand the feeling: John's message, for them, was electrifying. They got it.

And yet, like we heard from Jesus last week, John is one of those prophets who, if we don't find his words disturbing, we haven't understood him. John is warning the spiritual leaders of his day—the Pharisees and the Sadducees—that they cannot always count on God to be on their side. "Do not presume to say," he told them, that "'We have Abraham as our ancestor;' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." He then goes on to warn them, in very harsh terms, that the axe is nearby and ready to be used—not on their enemies, as they expected, but on them as Jews—to cut them off from their presumed inheritance. Many of those leaders took his warning to heart, and they also lined up for John's baptism as a sign of their own repentance. But still, John is unrelenting. "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful is coming after me...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." God's return to reestablish his kingdom on earth is very near, and the best thing they could do to prepare for it was to repent. The return of God in the fire of judgment will separate those who were ready for that return, the wheat, from those who were not, the chaff. The righteous among them would be gathered to God's side, but the unrighteous would burn with unquenchable fire. So, prepare!

Whew. As we well know, such language has been grist for the mills of preachers ever since, but it's worth pausing and stepping back from it to get some perspective. Early Christians, of course, also believed that John's appearing was foretold in the Hebrew scriptures, but they viewed his announcement of the soon-coming kingdom as being intimately linked with the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. And, indeed, as we'll see, John's ministry seemed to be very significant in helping Jesus to define his own mission, which in the end had a very similar but not identical focus as John's. But let's not rush ahead in the story. Let's linger a bit in the anticipation and, dare I say, the *anxiety* of Advent—the anxiety of waiting, waiting and longing for our heart's deepest desires, but not yet being sure that what we so dearly hope for will in fact come to pass. Let's not miss the forest for the trees. These lessons scream out to us: What are *we* doing today— in this church, in this community—to prepare for our Lord's Advent?

As a congregation, we are preparing for the coming of a new Rector. This is not in any way to make light of our lessons this morning, but a very real task to which we have put our hands as we do our small, but important part to advance God's kingdom in this corner of the world. And here, I want to commend you. We are several months in the interim period, and the biggest compliment I know to give you is to observe that our ministries as a congregation are, so far as I can tell, proceeding almost without interruption. Our services are being held, our children are being formed, people are being fed, the sick are visited, we and the wider community are being served through our wonderful music programs, our classroom and kitchen spaces serve many each week, and visitors and inquirers are welcomed into our church family. Meanwhile, the hard work of organizing the search process goes on, the Elijah building project is moving forward, and our

Altar Guild is working very hard behind the scenes to prepare us for Christmas. I am humbled by your hard work, but also very proud to be associated with you.

This being said, I am also reminded on this, the Second Sunday in Advent, of our vibrant contemplative ministries. In the midst of all the work and busyness of our congregational and family lives, let us not neglect a different sort of preparation as *individual* Christians. Let us take some time, deliberately, to seek rest and quietness, to explore internally the anxieties that emerge with waiting and longing for our Lord's visitation in the midst of a very uncertain world. Let us ask: What might be waiting for *us* in the quiet of our meditations and prayers? I am reminded of what is reported to be an old Zen statement: We should normally meditate for 20 minutes. Unless we're busy; then, we should meditate for an hour! I sincerely hope we will find the time for our personal preparations. So, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." What are the knots inside our own hearts and souls that need to be untied, examined, and straightened a bit? I hope we'll also find the time to explore this question this Advent. Amen.