

Matthew 3:1-12
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Isaiah 11:1-10
Romans 14:4-13

Advent 2 A
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
December 4, 2022
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The World God Dreams

My beloved Jim tells a story about showing up at the back of a church on the second Sunday of Advent some years ago, bearded, wild-eyed, barefoot and dressed in the closest thing to smelly camel skins he could muster up. And just as the gospel reading was to begin, this would-be John the Baptist stalked up the main aisle of the church, pointing and shouting *“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 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. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”* He offers to be John the Baptist each year, but I never take him up on it. The words alone are hard enough, I think we can do without the yelling.

I know the prophets cannot be domesticated, but I also know that terrifying people into good behavior is not the point of the prophetic voice. Yes, the prophets speak judgment, but it’s easy to misconstrue the role of judgment in God’s view, and in our lives. When the prophets speak, we need to pay very careful attention lest we dump ourselves into a deep, dark hole of despair and simply give up. Being made to feel bad never does any good. That is not what John the Baptist was doing when he called all those Pharisees and Sadducees a “brood of vipers.” He was simply calling out the truth. People were turning away from God because the religious leaders were behaving badly. And because those religious authorities were more concerned with their religiosity than they were with God’s people, particularly God’s most vulnerable people, John did what prophets do. He called a spade a spade. Was it harsh? Yes, it was. But people’s lives were at stake, and it was John’s job to expose that truth.

I don’t have the prophet’s prophetic voice. I am much more inclined to hold up a mirror and say – *Look! Look how beautiful you are, look at how beloved you are, look at yourself the way God looks at you... you are loved beyond your wildest imagining, so doesn’t that just make you want to go out and love everyone and everything right back?* I call it loving people into submission, and that is my way. I am not a prophet. I am actually one of the people who has been profoundly hurt by harsh judgment, and I’m uncomfortable in the judgment seat. But we need the prophets, so we listen to John the Baptist, the wild man who shows up every year on the second Sunday in Advent, who was the last in a long line of prophetic voices that went back thousands of years.

Like all prophets, John makes us uncomfortable. We know we don't measure up and so we worry that we're the chaff, not the wheat, and that God wants to burn us away. But it isn't so. The judgment John was talking about wasn't about sorting good behavers from bad behavers. It was about telling the truth – to ourselves, to each other, to God. Prophetic judgment has at its heart, a desire for the truth to be known. For Matthew's hearers, an oppressed people who were living in somebody else's empire, the truth of their condition needed to be exposed. It's no different today. I have a friend with two black daughters who worries every time her children leave the house. I have another friend who worries about going to her favorite club because five of the people who were at their favorite club two weeks ago, were shot dead and many more were injured. Sometimes it feels like the truth is too much to bear... but if we don't look, if we don't speak the truth, we can't help, and nothing will change.

Sometimes the truth feels like good news and sometimes it doesn't. There have been times in my life when I know I've hurt people, even the ones I love the best. And there are times when those people have hurt me. And at some level, it doesn't make any difference which side of the hurting we're on, it all feels terrible and it all needs to be healed. I think what John is trying to tell us is that God wants everything exposed so we can look at it, clean it up, and turn from any of it that is hurtful so we can begin to bear fruit worthy of repentance. That doesn't mean just changing behavior. It means recognizing that the Kingdom of Heaven has come among us and to be a part of that requires orienting ourselves toward God.

I think most people hear the word "repent" and imagine it means something like saying how very, very, very, very sorry you are, so sorry in fact that you will never, ever, ever in a million years do that terrible horrible thing, again. And while apologizing and asking for forgiveness when we've hurt someone is very important, it isn't what repentance means. Repentance means is turning around. Turning around and reorienting. You see, repentance isn't so much about the past and what's been done as it is about God's future and what needs to be done.

Feeling guilty about what we've done is of no earthly good if it leaves us feeling bad and unwilling to change our ways. Repentance is about what we do going forward. When we repent, we refocus on God and God's ways. When we repent, we turn around, reorient, move forward into a life in God. We don't change for the sake of change, we change in order to step into synch with God's dream for us and act for the good of the whole creation. We turn, we reorient because God won't be found in the direction we've been going.

John, like all the prophets, speaks a word of judgment to us because we have not fully oriented ourselves toward God. That shouldn't come as any surprise, yet year after year, the Advent texts surprise us. We're looking for the sweet baby Jesus and instead Advent calls us to look at our unwillingness to give ourselves to the God who only wants to love us. You see, when we choose the way of the world over God's ways, we can be pretty sure we're going to feel God's judgment. At least I hope we do... but not in the way you might think. Here's what I mean.

There are words in the Rite 1 confession our 8:00 congregation says each Sunday, that I cannot say. We speak of the sin “which we from time to time have most grievously committed in thought, word and deed against thy divine majesty...” I have no trouble saying that. But the next words I cannot say. “...provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us.” I have not experienced God’s wrath or indignation against me, nor do I know of anyone who actually has. I have only experienced a God who loves me. Now certainly I have felt called to account, but it isn’t because God is doing that to me. It is because I know I have failed - failed myself, failed God, God’s people, God’s creation. And when that happens, I can hardly bear it.

I don’t need a punishing god or a vengeful god or a god to condemn me, I do that myself. Besides which, that kind of a god would have such a diminishing and nasty impact on me that I would turn away in a heartbeat. Feeling small, feeling bad, feeling wrong doesn’t do much to enliven us and send us out to do God’s good work in the world. For me, God’s judgment comes in the form of God’s love. When I have been unkind or thoughtless or lazy or judgmental, it is God’s unspeakable love that moves me to change, to repent, to turn around and bear fruit worthy of repentance. It’s loving kindness, not wrath that moves me to tears.

It’s Advent. Christmas is coming. And while it would be so much sweeter to be thinking about the beautiful baby Jesus in the soft light of the manger, the sweet smell of alfalfa on the breath of all those friendly beasts, that’s not the Advent message. Advent is the time of preparation and finding a way to make room in our hearts for the Christ child to enter in, and for most of us, that will take some very real attentiveness, prayerfulness and discernment, as we wait and watch and long for the world God is dreaming for us. Because if our heart’s desire is truly to want what God dreams for us, our longing will be so deep that we will turn around, will orient ourselves toward God, and we will play our own particular part in creating a world ready to receive the One who came to show us the dream God is dreaming for us all. Amen.