

“Anger, Winnowing, and Vision”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

Richard E. Otty
December 4, 2016
Second Advent

The words are loaded as Matthew introduces us to John the Baptist:
Wilderness – the place of both of Israel’s mourning and its hope, and where John, as the Messianic messenger will appear.

Camel’s hair and a leather belt - John’s strange clothing, of a poor Bedouin, but the ears of those in the first century will know it is the same worn by the revered prophet Elijah.

Locusts and wild honey – John’s strange and austere diet, but one that marks an avowed trust in God’s provision.

Winnowing and threshing of wheat from chaff – common images of divine judgment.

An axe – a tool of Roman power, used not to prune trees, but to threaten and control human lives.

Proclaim, repent, prepare, bear fruit – verbs prophets used to declare God’s vision and will.

The words and images, the tone and immediacy of language all focus on John as a prophet. And people are streaming to him. They are coming out from Boston, and the whole region of Middlesex County, and there are even some who are gathering from the region all around the Nashua River where he is baptizing, including independent sorts from New Hampshire – they are all coming out to John.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all portray John the Baptist as the expected messenger from the wilderness, using the words of Isaiah 40 to declare John has come to “prepare the way of the Lord.” We call John the Baptist, perhaps because John the Presbyterian does not quite fit. Most of us cannot imagine John checking his Book of Order. Yet, we know John more by his preaching than any detail of his baptizing. It is clearly a baptism with water, likely done just once, and it is connected to confessing sin, to repentance, to preparing for the one to come.

But then... But then we will hear a group of Pharisees and Sadducees also came out to John; well, if as I shared last week, I lost it with a basketball referee 24 years ago, John loses it when these powerful men arrive. “You brood of vipers!” are his first words to them. It was not a greeting of endearment. Being called “lowly snakes who crawl on their bellies” would not be welcomed by these men of status and wealth, power and privilege.

Now, before I read our Gospel lesson, there is often a question as to why Pharisees and Sadducees would leave the security of Boston and venture out to the Nashua River to see John? Various translations differ, in part because of a Greek preposition that can be translated as either “coming for baptism,” or “coming against baptism.” That’s a challenge for preaching. Most translations indicate the religious leaders simply came out to the place where John was baptizing, perhaps out of curiosity, but perhaps to gather evidence to hand over to the Romans.

The newer Common English Bible stands alone in translating these religious leaders “came to be baptized by John.” If this was the case, then we could have fun with John’s reaction. We could put words in his mouth, “You...[he almost laughs], you dare to come here for baptism. Well, let me tell you, you who think yourselves to be so upright and noble, you who judge others so easily and coldly; well, you are not worthy of my baptism. You give no evidence your lives bear the fruit of true repentance.” Yes, it would be fun to stick it to the elites and their desires to hone in on John’s baptism, but we can’t be sure they actually approached with a desire for John’s baptism.

What we know is the Pharisees and Sadducees represent the political and religious powers that will oppose prophets like John, and later Jesus. Yet, they also fear John to a degree, because of his popularity, and also because John owes them nothing. Symbolized by his diet, John is dependent on God alone. John has no favors to repay, no fans to please, no donors seeking payback. That frightens those in power, those who seek to control, those who enjoy privilege of office or heritage.

Matthew 3:1-12 – John the Baptist prepares the way.

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³ This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.⁵ Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan,⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ But when John saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ “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. He will baptize you with^[c] the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

You are driving, when all of a sudden, a dense fog bank envelopes the roadway, and even with headlights turned on, you drive with a combination of caution and tension. You are concerned a driver ahead may have failed to put on their lights, or one behind will not see yours. You fear you won’t see a pedestrian walking along the road’s edge, an edge you cannot clearly see. There is no room to safely pull well off the road, so you inch ahead, hoping the sun will soon cut through, lift the veil, and return one’s vision.

Isaiah offered a beautiful vision of what we term the peaceable kingdom, where all creation dwells in harmony and peace, yet this vision is near at hand but not yet come. It is not yet clear and present, but it envisions the hoped for return of a king like David who will lift the fog of exile, the imagines the peace to be revealed.

While seeming to be in stark contrast, I believe the words of John the Baptist include warnings not to let go of such visions as we heard in Isaiah, offering a Messianic hope that is at hand but not yet here. John's baptism is a means to prepare for that day when the fog will lift. The way it is done is through repentance, beginning with the admission that the fruit God desires is not being produced, and the vision God declares is not being realized. John welcomes to baptism those who recognize their need to turn things around, their part in fogging up the vision of this new kingdom, this God-empire that is coming in the person of Jesus.

This new kingdom will not be marked by institutions, symbolized by the Pharisees and Sadducees who come to John. It is likely going to be more fluid, which goes against our desires for stability, the human need to grasp onto something solid – rules, traditions, which then can easily become institutionalized so there are those who are in and those who are out.

John predicted the religious leaders would say, “We are children of Abraham,” thinking it was their EZ-Pass through life's fog. We sometimes use similar phrases:

We are God's people.

We are redeemed sinners.

We are Christians.

Such mark our identity and give us grounding, stability; yet as with the Pharisees and Sadducees, we are cautioned to watch for when we allow such claims to create systems of power that lead to control and exclusion, privilege and even elitism, so that saying, “We are Christians” can easily become mostly about us and little about Christ.

John told the religious leaders, “Your heritage, your family lineage to Abraham, does not give you a pass on repentance.” In fact, the fruits you bear have no semblance to those God desires, and if you don't recognize that, then my baptism will not be of any benefit.” I hear John saying, because they think they are so “in”, they cannot see “out” and don't even know they are driving in the fog for they have forgotten God's vision.

Institutions, including the church, often focus on individual wrongdoing, personal sin, as the source of societal trouble. They set up means of calling for repentance for the naughty acts of individual sin. The process is to confess your sin, perhaps even make a sacrifice or offering for it, and receive forgiveness. All is good. And we hope other people will repent the same way we do.

Yet, as Brandon Wrencher writes in *Sojourners* magazine, “Repentance is not about teary faces and altar calls. [Repentance] is about interrupting the world's tendency to silence suffering.” [“Sojourners”, December 2016, p. 48] This moves repentance beyond personal sin and confession to the failure to see a greater vision. Even John's repentance is not about living individually godly lives, about each person bearing fruit, but extends to Isaiah's greater vision of peace and harmony, of equality and equity, of the wolf and lamb eating together, and a little child leading them. We link that little child, emerging from the root of the tree of Jesse, King David's father, to Jesus.

I did muse about the literal image of Isaiah's peaceable kingdom being constructed in Sudbury, other area towns, or even Ayer, where we live. Of course, you would need a permit. Imagine going to town hall and on your application, you state that in your yard, *the wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat; the calf and the young lion will feed together.*

You know the reaction and the question. Property values! What will it do to property values?! Everyone will applaud the peaceable kingdom, just not in my back yard. (NIMBY)

Yet, my real concern is how we dismiss Isaiah's vision as unreal. If our primary concern is how things affect our net worth; if we only focus on the reality of evil; if we see salvation only in systems; then we have probably already relegated God's peaceable kingdom to the cover of a Christmas card.

If so, we might consider if it is time to take a trip to the Nashua River to meet John. It is not an easy trip, for we don't like to hear prophetic anger, and repentance beyond our personal sin may cause us to face our own status and even privilege. People who fear, or hold tightly to power, prestige or property, may not even realize they are driving in the fog; or if they do, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, they have forgotten there is still a God-vision beyond what they cannot yet see.

If you have ever driven into a fog bank, not knowing for how long you would be enveloped in it, you can probably still feel how the tension and anxiety left your body as the sun broke through and lifted the fog. We make a visit to John not to lift the fog, but to remind ourselves of what the fog is hiding, that there is a vision and promise of a peaceable kingdom God desires, and that it is real, and it is possible, and it is coming.