

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Like a Blue Norther

Luke 3:1-6

December 8, 2024

Advent II

The gospel reading today introduces us to John, who appears in the wilderness proclaiming a “baptism of repentance.” Repentance is a turning of heart, soul, mind, and body from what was to what is and what will be. We are all called, as those who will soon meet Jesus, to do whatever it is we need to do right now to prepare to meet our Lord. Years ago, I was helping lead a youth group in Miami. We were teaching about humility before the Lord of Glory and asked the kids, “If Jesus were to walk in the room, what would you do?” They basically said, “I’d give him a high five and say what’s up, Jesus?” I mean, they have a point. There is something nice about the excitement of receiving Jesus, a kind of confidence that he would be glad to see you. It’s better than, “Crucify him,” which has happened before. So, there’s something good about this, and yet, I sort of thought maybe they’d missed the point—or at least missed part of the point. John the Baptist probably would have thought that there is something necessary in us about coming to Jesus that is a little bit of humility, a little bit of preparation, a little bit of recognition that when you come before Jesus, you are coming before the holy one---you are coming before the God of all, and that suggests some kind of need to do some self-examination to be ready for that kind of encounter.

That’s where we are today when we meet John on the second Sunday of Advent. If you’ve been through the season of Advent before, John needs no introduction. He is at the beginning of the gospels, heralding the coming of Jesus; he is the one who prepares the way of the Lord. John’s the man before the man. We’ve met John, and now we come back around to him again as we do each year before Christmas. Admittedly, it’s not the most comfortable thing. John’s a little wild. He’s a little rough. He’s a direct speaker. He’s out in the wild and all. And his way of “Adventing” is not like all the rest of the signs of the holiday season. While the rest are pointing you down Candy-Cane Lane to Wassail Falls and then to Gumdrop Lake, John’s out there saying stuff that will make you uncomfortable. Yet, we go back out there to him every year. Why? Why go through this, with his “You’re a brood of vipers” thing, and his “repent and be baptized,” and his crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord.”

Why? Each person has their own answer I suppose, including “I don’t know, I just showed up here, and I didn’t ask for this.” If the wisdom of the church year is anything, it’s as if you can’t get to Christmas without going through this part of Advent. You can’t get to Jesus without going through John—or something like John. John in the wilderness with a baptism of repentance to which he calls us.

There’s a larger principle here: Coming to Jesus is not something to be taken lightly, joyfully, but not lightly. To receive Jesus, one must be prepared. One must be ready. The keywords in Advent all reinforce this: be alert, wake up, be ready, prepare the way of the

Lord. John is not afraid of whatever part of your life that needs to be changed. He lives among scorpions and wild beasts; he's not afraid of yours.

With John, this Advent time is a season of preparation to meet our Lord. We need this time. Maybe, too, deep down, we *want* this time. Maybe there's nothing more that our hearts desire than to renew our faith, to be shaken awake, to be challenged in some deep and important way and changed and reformed. And there's John. John's preaching is hard. His message is like a bitter drink, but if you are in a place in your faith when that's what you need, then there's nothing that will take its place. No amount of sweet syrup can do what one bitter sip can do that's good for your soul.

John Graves writes with leather-worn insight into this aspect of human nature—that we need and should welcome some challenges in our lives that serve to cleanse us, and by which God cleanses us. In the late 1950s Graves set out on a three-week solo canoe trip down the upper Brazos River. He wanted to get out on the river once last time before it was dammed up and tamed, as it was going to be. In his memoir, *Goodbye to a River*, he writes about launching out on a pleasant day in November but with forecasts and whispers that bad weather coming.

It's me that calls it bad weather; Graves doesn't call it bad weather. For him, it's just weather. Hard, bitter cold, the kind that rushes from the north into west Texas and cuts through anyone who has the courage to be outside their warm blankets. Graves doesn't call it bad; for him and those like him, it's not bad; it just is, and it can teach you something if you let it. But that doesn't mean it's comfortable.

We need winter if we're to appreciate summer; we need silence if we are to have ears to hear the music; we need some brown and gray if we're to have eyes for green. This all sounds dark, I suppose, to some in Advent. But we're out here to see John in the wilderness, so it would be good to get our heads and hearts on right about what we're doing. This is serious stuff. We need John if we're to come to Jesus.

They say there's nothing between the Arctic and Abilene but a barbed wire fence. Graves was several days into his canoe journey down the river when he looked up and saw the wall of clouds that only means one thing to a Texan—a blue norther. A blue norther is a wall of frigid atmosphere barreling south from the frozen tundra up north. On that day, there was nothing in its way but a barbed wire fence and a solo canoe on the river with John Graves in it. It hammered him with wind and rain, and on the other side of it was a new season in which everything had changed.

(Graves, 119): In the days that follow the arrival of the new season, Graves writes: "Change. Autumn. Maybe-certainly—there was melancholy in it, but it was a good melancholy. I've never been partial to the places where the four seasons are one. If the sun shines all year long [at Lo Jolla], and the water stays warm enough for swimming over rocks that wave moss-like green long hair, that is pleasant, but not much else. Sunshine and warm water seem to me to have full meaning only when they come after winter's bite; green is not so green if it doesn't follow the months of brown and gray.

And the scheduled, inevitable death of green carries its own exhilaration; in that change is the promise of all the rebirths to come, and the deaths, too . . . in the alternation of bite and caress, of fat and lean, of song and silence, is the reward and punishment that life has always been, and the punishment itself becomes good, maybe because it promises reward, maybe because after much honey the puckering acid of acorns tastes right.”

I think we can say that John’s preaching is the bitter acorn of Advent. John the Baptist is the blue norther of the otherwise pleasant holiday season journey. He comes with a force, and through him, God pierces the heart and soul of everyone in the path.

We may recall the words of the prophet Malachi, “Who can endure the day of his coming? He is like a refiner’s fire and like washer’s soap.”

Let’s not hide from him or his message of repentance. There is a time for summer sunny days, basking in the warm glow of life’s encouragement, delight, and pleasant pleasure. I hope you have many of those days. We need them all. Marriage experts—if there is such a thing—say we need 5 positive interactions for every one negative interaction. I’m certain that’s about right. I hope you have days when everyone tells you how great you are; you are so good-looking, so smart, so successful. Everything you do, every decision you make, all that you do is good and blessed. You’re all above average. You hear the good word like Paul wrote to the Philippians, “I thank my God for every remembrance of you, always in every prayer . . .” I hope there are long days of bliss for you. Find the people in your life who will give them to you and give them to others.

I hope there are long days of it for you. But it isn’t a day when you go out to see John. What did you expect to see? A reed shaken by the wind? A man dressed in soft clothing? What did we expect in Advent?

The flicker of the warm glow of a candle? Yes, and it’s here.

The soothing, dulcitude sounds of familiar tunes? Yes, and they’re here, too.

Did you expect assurances that you are beloved and worthy to be loved? Certainly, they are here, and even more at the Incarnation to come.

But between here at the Incarnation, on this river of time, is the winter solstice of the shortest day of the year and melancholy for some and John’s stormy preaching for us all.

“Repent and be baptized, you brood of vipers.” Not exactly, “Away in a manger,” is it?

I confess I don’t know that I like or need to be told I’m a snake by John or anyone. But what I do need, from time to time, is...

...a new beginning in my faith and someone who helps me get there...

... new beginning in my commitments that I’ve let run aground...

... in my joy, in my relationship with God.

Isn’t that what John is thundering out in the wilderness by the bank of the river.

There are some hard places in your life that have built up. Let them be shaken down.

And some low places in your life that have been rutted out.
Let them be filled in and brought up higher.
There are some crooked places. Let them be straightened out.
There are some regrets. Let God's severe mercy come in and do its work.
This is all the good work of God's mercy.

It's not that you need that work done so you're worthy of Jesus' love. Nothing you do makes you worthy of Jesus' love. But the coming of Jesus and his love make us want—hunger—desire to give ourselves fully to him and want to change whatever needs to be changed that has gotten in the way.

This may be is the deepest kind of encouragement. The wilderness is where we meet God, where we are stripped of our distractions and pretenses and shame, and the farther we go or are thrust into the wilderness, we are still safe because God is there. It's the deepest kind of affirmation, the kind we actually, really need. You are beloved. No matter how far gone you think you are. You are within the range of God's searing, generous, prodigal grace. There's no fence between you and the powerful grace of God in Christ coming toward you. The days are surely coming. He's coming, you can see it even from here. You can feel the winds beginning to turn. Let them blow through you and herald a new season beginning in you. Prepare the way of the Lord.

Amen.

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