

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 12/04/05
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, NY
2 Advent; Text: Mark 1:1-8

On the second and third Sundays of Advent, our worship experience is invaded by the overbearing and less than delightful presence of John the Baptist. I have to admit that if someone like John was reported to be hanging around the outskirts of Croton, I'd be sure not to travel in that direction. He sounds like a nutcase to me – dressed strangely, eating strangely, speaking strangely. Yet, for some reason, people flocked to him. Our text says that people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

From the various Gospel accounts, we learn that John the Baptist was a prophet, called by God to proclaim that with the imminent coming of the anointed One of God, the old system was over, and a new reality was being ushered in. John didn't pretend that the political, social, and religious institutions of his day were just fine. He took a long, hard look around him, and he saw that the world was a mess. He recognized that while many had more than they needed, others had almost nothing. He acknowledged that those who had power oppressed those who didn't. Things had to change; things would change, he insisted. The Messiah was coming, and a new world would result.

Clearly, to those among his listeners who were poor, marginalized, and powerless, John's announcement of the breaking in of a new reality was very good news. That message gave hope to those who had no hope; comfort where there had only been suffering. It makes sense that those folks would stick around to hear more of what this peculiar man had to say. But how might John's message possibly be good news to those who had the money, the power, and the privilege in that time and place? Why would they not only stay and listen to his ranting, but also take his words to heart, repent, and be baptized? Why didn't they cover their ears at John's blatant call to change the direction of their lives, and simply walk away?

It seems to me that the privileged who heard John's words knew, deep within themselves, that he was speaking the truth. It takes an enormous amount of energy to keep up appearances; to try to pretend and believe that things really are fine, when we know that that's not the case. Sometimes it's a relief to actually face reality squarely, to sweep away the pretense, to come to terms with who we are and how we're living. Though the message of John the Baptist would have been a difficult one for some to hear, maybe receiving and embracing it offered the possibility of a new reality even to those who benefited from the rules of the old system.

I believe that like the privileged in John's society, who came to see and hear this odd man, and who stayed to seriously reflect on his hard words, we, gathered here, want to hear and acknowledge the truth of the Gospel. We really don't want to pretend that the complete imbalance in the world between those who have and those who don't is okay with us. In our hearts, we recognize the truth of God's word and the truth of our own lives, and we want to ask the hard questions of ourselves that will open us up to the

means through which the healing power of God transforms the world. If we're willing, God will enable and empower us to be active participants in the kingdom of God.

In Luke's version of John the Baptist's arrival on the scene, after he preaches to the crowds, they ask him, "What then should we do?" John replies, "Share what you have with those who have less. Conduct your business with absolute integrity. Live justly, unselfishly, and compassionately."

Hearing John's message this Advent, what should we do? How do we – who in our own estimation of ourselves are simply ordinary, middle-class people trying to make ends meet, but who are, in relation to most of the rest of world, truly the privileged and the powerful – how do we respond to the call to repentance issued us by John the Baptist? How do we - who are actually among the absolute wealthiest of the world simply because we have a choice of what to eat for our next meal and have access to some form of transportation – how do we join God in the work of ushering in God's kingdom? What then should we do?

Do we – as individuals, as families, as a faith community - make do with less and live more simply and carefully? Do we try to give away the same amount we spend on ourselves – or half that, or a tenth of that? Do we commit ourselves to regularly spend time at a food pantry, or a shelter for the homeless, or caring for the sick, or visiting those in prison? Do we dedicate time and energy into finding out what's going on in Niger and in Sudan and to become engaged in some way? What should we do?

Larry and I raised our two sons in the church. They can't remember a time when going to church wasn't simply what our family did on Sundays, and this was long before I was ordained and it was my job to be there. When our oldest son was a senior in high school and was allowed to stay out Saturday nights until 1 a.m. (and then would come home and be on line with his friends for another couple of hours), we still expected him to go to church on Sunday. He discovered that if he went to the 8 a.m. service instead of the 10, it was quiet enough that he never had to completely wake up, and he could then go back to bed and sleep the rest of the morning. But he went to church because it was what we did.

But like most young adults, now that they're out of our household, neither of our sons is attending church. Could it be that they and their friends don't see much connection between what we say and do here, and how we live our lives? We listen to hard and difficult messages from our sacred text, to which we reverently respond, "Thanks be to God," or "Praise to you, Lord Christ." And then we drift away from what we've heard and live pretty much as we did before. If we, as Christians, truly believed and intentionally acted on what we hear and say throughout our liturgy – in the words of Jesus and John the Baptist, in our prayers, in the sacraments – our lives would be radically different and the world would be radically different. If we actually lived out what we affirm here, church couldn't possibly be irrelevant in the eyes of our kids. They would see for themselves how God, through God's people, is in the process of ushering in a new reality, and how we have the privilege of being part of that process.

John the Baptist spoke, and those who first heard him and those who hear him today know he spoke the truth. The world is a mess. And John spoke the truth when he said that what we should do to participate in the reign of God is to share what we have and to live justly. This was, and is, hard to hear and even harder to do. But we will starve, spiritually, if we don't respond. And we can do even the hardest things through the life-changing, world-transforming power of God, who has come among us in the person of Jesus Christ.

What should we do? That's a life-long question. Maybe our questions for today should be, "What should we do first? What should we do right now?" Amen.