

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 12/11/05
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
3 Advent; Text: John 1:6-8, 19-28

John the Baptist is back. In last week's Gospel text, we heard Mark's description of John's Spartan lifestyle – wearing camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey; of his calling – to prepare the way of the Lord; and of the response to John's ministry – people from the countryside and the city flocking to him and heeding his call to repentance and baptism.

This week, the lectionary offers us John's take on John the Baptist. Like Mark, John includes a description of John the Baptist's mission. But leading up to that, John tells of a conversation that takes place between John the Baptist and the priests sent by the religious authorities of Jerusalem.

These priests and Levites come to question John the Baptist specifically about who he is. In answer to their inquiries, John emphatically denies that he, himself, is the long-awaited Messiah. He insists that he's not Elijah, the great prophet. John refuses to be identified with "the prophet," whoever that might be. In this text, John doesn't actually say who he is, but rather, he states what he's about. "What do you say about yourself?" his questioners want to know. He answers, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'make straight the way of the Lord.' "

I don't know why those who constructed our lectionary thought that we needed to hear John the Baptist's story two weeks in a row. I actually thought it was pretty clear the first time around. But as I've read and re-read this particular text, what stands out for me is the expectations of John's questioners. They come to John the Baptist wanting to know who he is. Yet, they also come with an agenda. They're already looking for someone or something specific. What is it, or who is it that they're looking for, and why?

Israel had, for hundreds of years, been awaiting the Messiah, the anointed One of God, who would set Israel free and re-establish the throne of David, ushering in a new and everlasting reign of God, and breaking the cycle of oppression, domination, and suffering under which Israel had lived. Behind the desire for the coming of the Messiah was hope for release from slavery, from captivity, and from powerlessness.

Israel expected that the great prophet, Elijah, would someday return. According to tradition, Elijah hadn't died, but had been transported into heaven. Elijah was a zealot, who had fought mightily against injustice and idolatry in his time, and with his return would come the power and the strength of God. Behind the desire for the coming of Elijah was the hope for justice and righteousness to be established

Scholars have different opinions about who this other prophet might be whose identity the priests and Levites connect with John the Baptist. Some suggest that it's a Moses-like figure, associated with the giving of the Law. If that's the case, behind the desire for the coming of Moses might be the hope for clarity and certainty. If we know exactly what

the rules are, and what's expected of us, and we do that perfectly, then surely bad things won't happen to good people.

In preparing a sermon, I usually take a look at a contemporary translation of the Gospel text. While a modern version of the Bible may not be quite as accurate as others, there's often a word or a phrase that catches my attention and launches the passage right into the middle of my life. Here's an example. We're accustomed to hearing John the Baptist's mission statement as this: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" This is a contemporary translation: "I am a voice shouting in the desert, 'Make it easy for the Lord to arrive.'" Make it easy for the Lord to arrive.

In this season of Advent, we await the arrival of the Lord. We acknowledge Christ's arrival as the child Jesus, born in Bethlehem. We anticipate the full restoration of all things through the redemptive power of Christ at the end of time. And we look for Christ's arrival in, around, and through us, as we affirm the presence and the love of Christ in our midst. But I wonder if we sometimes don't make it easy for Christ to arrive because of our pre-conceived notions of what Christ's coming to us should look like. Like the priests and Levites, I wonder if our expectations sometimes prevent us from recognizing the arrival of the holy One who stands before us.

Do we expect the liberator Christ to release us from our personal slavery - to work, to food, to alcohol or drugs, to excessive consumption, to raising perfect children, to living with a crippling disability - without our engagement in the hard work necessary to face the pain, the loss, or the fear that either underlies or is a consequence of our particular prison? What if Christ's coming is actually manifested through our inability to hold it all together ourselves, or through the friend or family member who confronts us in love? What if Christ comes through the companion on the journey toward wholeness and healing, or through the grace of simply getting to the end of another day acknowledging that our lives are beyond our own control?

Do we expect the Christ of strength and might to intervene and stop the fighting between peoples and between nations, or to prevent a natural disaster from taking place? What if Christ's coming is actually manifested through the efforts of two individuals who disagree treating each other with respect, or through the drawing together of a community to try to address the horrors taking place in Sudan, or through the relationship that's built when a volunteer at the Coast Episcopal School in Long Beach, Mississippi shares a simple meal with someone who lost everything in the hurricane?

Do we expect Christ, in whom the Law of Moses was fulfilled, to work in the world according to our personal behavior? Do we assume that the more good that we do, the less likely we'll encounter heartache and tragedy? What if Christ's coming is about the softening of our hearts as we love others as ourselves in practical ways, or the space that opens up for God when our hearts are broken with grief, or the gratitude that fills our lives as we generously share with those who have less than we do?

Where are we looking for Christ's coming? In these last days of Advent, may we make it easy for Christ to arrive. May our expectations of Christ's coming not be limited by what we think the manifestation of Christ must look like. May our eyes and our hearts and our lives be opened to the presence of Christ right here in our midst. And may we anticipate Christ's coming in ways beyond our wildest imaginings. Amen.*

*I gratefully acknowledge the inspiration I received from a sermon preached by The Rev. Jim Munroe. His ideas helped birth this sermon.

