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“The Unwelcome Advent Guest”

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Isaiah 40:1–11; Matthew 3:1–12

John the Baptist. The mention of his name brings to mind a counter-cultural religious zealot. Living in the wilderness, dressing in strange clothing, eating an odd diet, John appears on the fringes of civilized society and some might even say sanity. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!” he cries out, making his oratorical pitch. And what does John do when people respond? He flies into a rage, shouting, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath that is to come?” John the Baptist is definitely over the top.

He is one of the strange characters of the Bible, seemingly bigger than life. You and I know such people, at least in temperament: austere, intense, abrasive. When it comes this time of the year with holiday parties and gatherings, such people don’t appear on anyone’s list of invitees. Why tolerate, much less entertain, such a character in this fine season of Advent?

We do our best to avoid them. Maybe he’s a relative and all the family is coming, so you don’t really have a choice. Or perhaps she is part of a group or organization, and everyone is invited. You make an agreement with another attendee: “If you see me get cornered by him, by her, come rescue me, and I’ll do the same for you!”

Most of us today have a negative reaction to John the Baptist, and people like him. John usually shows up about this time in the Advent and Christmas scripture

readings, but he feels like an intrusion—he is an unwelcome guest in our festivities.

Our scripture reading indicates that masses of people responded positively to John and his message. Jerusalem and all Judea and the entire region came to hear his preaching. One translation of the text gives the impression that even the leadership of the temple and local synagogues came to John for baptism. Something powerful must have been at play for even the religious and political leaders to be attracted. What did they see in John the Baptist that we are missing?

It is helpful to understand the context of that day. A foreign army and government occupied the Jewish nation. The economy was terrible. Political and religious leaders were divided into many opposing camps. Revolutionaries advocated violence against their enemies. It was difficult to know whom to believe, whom to trust. Ordinary people were barely getting by. The hopes and aspirations of a nation—whose history was marked by deliverance from slavery in Egypt and exile in Babylon—this nation strained toward another deliverance.

It is no wonder the proclamation “the kingdom of heaven is near” caught fire in their hearts.

Has anything sparked a fire in your heart lately? Has your imagination been set ablaze by beauty perceived or justice achieved or freedom restored or hope given or love shared?

I think one of the great challenges for us today is to have a proper passion that drives us, that channels our actions and sustains our energy when the going gets difficult.

That is why John the Baptist plays such an important role in the season of Advent. He is an eschatological character. Eschatology has to do with end times, and the purpose of history.

We hear much about the end times today, but not much that is really worth hearing. John's proclamation of the kingdom of heaven is not merely nor primarily about the end of time: it is about the purpose toward which all history moves.

"The kingdom of heaven is near." In other words, shake yourself awake, keep the end in view so that it informs what you do right now. Remember the purpose toward which you live your life, and do that which is necessary to keep yourself focused on that purpose.

That message is critical because we so easily forget, we become distracted, we get overwhelmed. And maybe it takes someone over the top or on the edge to get the message across.

You and I are committed to doing good, to participate in things that are significant. Yet life happens. The kids get sick; work enters its busy season; the in-laws are coming to visit and the house is a wreck. When you are up to your neck in alligators, it is easy to forget that the job is to drain the swamp.

Often we seek relief from life's demands and challenges by our preoccupation with "things." All you have to do is open the Sunday newspaper or get the mail this time of year to be deluged with ads for things.

Awhile back I was reading through obituaries in the paper. One in particular absolutely astounded me. In the article it said that the passions of this particular person included "eating good food at buffets and shopping for bargains at Big Lots."

I couldn't believe it. I laughed out loud! I cut out the article and read it to others! I said how sad it was.

You know, if the obituary had read, "His passions were gourmet cuisine and junkets to New York City," I probably wouldn't have batted an eye.

That says far more about me than I would like to admit. You see, the truth is, whether it's buffets or Dean & DeLuca, Big Lots or Neiman Marcus, in the end it is all the same: "things." It's just things.

It takes me a long time to become broadminded and sophisticated only to find that prejudice still lurks in the shadows of my enlightenment.

Prejudices papered over, vanity veneered to look like virtue, blind spots unexamined—all of these derail the possibilities for a proper passion that is anchored in the purpose to which all history moves.

Occasionally an event or a person in history stands out that points us toward the meaning and fulfillment of history. Nelson Mandela certainly comes to mind in this moment. As he languished in prison on Robben Island doing hard labor, he would tell new arrivals to the prison, "Chaps, these Afrikaners may be brutal, but they are human beings. We need to understand them and touch the human being inside them, and win them."

John the Baptist reminds us through his stark message and his bizarre behavior that things are out of whack. We know that is true, as did the masses of folk who flocked out to the wilderness. Aren't you and I willing to go to extremes when our health collapses, when relationships disintegrate, when finances fail? We desperately seek a remedy once we become aware of our dis-ease, our emptiness, our need. Maybe that is why John is the one who prepares the way of the Lord; maybe that is why every Advent season, this unsavory character intrudes into our celebration. John's presence not only prepares the way for the coming Messiah, his presence reminds us why the coming of the Messiah is necessary.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

That proclamation continues to ring in ominous tones for contemporary listeners. I think it is the word "repent." We are repelled by this word and its use or misuse in our own experience. We have frequently, if not exclusively, heard it used in a context of condemnation and judgment.

However, the meaning of the word is much more benign and neutral. To “repent” is to make a change, either in the direction one is going, or in one’s thinking, or in one’s actions.

It is fascinating to me that some people—highly thought of by the religious right who talk frequently about repentance—I understand that some people consider changing one’s direction or mind in political matters as a sign of weakness. It is evidence of a lack of resolve, and they call it being wishy-washy. Isn’t that ironic? What do they make of that passage in Exodus 32:14 where it says, “And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people?” Perhaps God has less to prove than us mere mortals. It must be okay for the Almighty to look wishy-washy.

It is time for us to rescue the word “repent.” It needs to be rehabilitated and reclaimed for its proper use.

One of the understandings of the word comes from the experience of nomadic people in the desert. As a caravan makes its way across the waterless sands, they reach “a point of repentance.” The “point of repentance” is the point beyond which they will perish if they do not have adequate supplies of water and food to complete their journey. At “the point of repentance,” they must check their supplies. If they have enough, they proceed. If not, they repent or turn aside and resupply at the nearest source of sustenance. To “repent” is to change direction *toward life*.

Have you and I checked our supply lately? What are we lacking? Are we able to make it across the unrelenting desert sands and beating sun of our present existence with what we have on hand?

I cannot think of better questions to ask in the season of Advent. As we rehearse the meaning of God’s goodness to us in the coming of Jesus, what is it that we need that will keep before us the purpose of being human, of serving one another, of creating peace and justice and wholeness for all God’s children?

In the story of John the Baptist, it is evident that John didn't take kindly to the presence of religious leaders responding to his call. Shouldn't he rejoice that they came?

If they thought of themselves as righteous and blameless, why would they need to repent and be baptized? Were these religious leaders merely hedging their bets in case they were wrong? It appears that they were playing both sides of the game, and John called them on it.

“Don't say to yourself, ‘We have Abraham as our father’ and think that will protect you. Just as God brought children out of the stone dead womb of Sarah, God can raise from these stones Abraham's children today. If you do not bear fruit consistent with your new direction, you are as good as dead—cut off.” And John proceeded to threaten them with the fiery judgment that would come when the Messiah appeared.

Those are difficult words to hear, but they are truthful words. Our actions have consequences. Our decisions impact others, for good or for ill. Don't be fooled—what we do makes a difference in this world, and our impact is never neutral.

It is important to note that John's expectations were not met in Jesus' ministry. John expected fiery judgment.

So when it did not come, John sent word to Jesus, inquiring, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect another?” (Matthew 11:2–6) And Jesus sent back a disappointing word. He did not say, “Look, John, we are gathering troops and will soon run the bad guys out of Judea.” Jesus did not say, “I'm whipping up this white-hot fire that will burn the chaff littering the floor.” Instead Jesus sent this word: “The blind receive their sight and the lame walk and the lepers are healed and the deaf hear and the dead are raised and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.”

As remarkable a man as John the Baptist was, he didn't comprehend what God would do through the One whose path he was preparing. The judgment that

properly belonged to the guilty, to those who perpetrated injustice, to those who failed, God took upon himself, and the rewards God gave to the undeserving.

And like John the Baptist, many of us are disappointed in that outcome, and Jesus must say to us, “Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.” Our desire for setting things right, for judgment, for justice—and sometimes even for revenge—is understandable.

And once in a while someone gets it, someone understands, someone puts in perspective his or her own life and its challenges and suffering and what it all means, in the context of the purpose toward which history is moving.

Again, it was Nelson Mandela. He could have cleaned house and burned the chaff with unquenchable flame when he became president of South Africa. No one would have blamed him.

Instead, this man, who, when he invited the spouses and widows of former white Presidents/Prime Ministers to tea, received news that Mrs. Betsy Verwoerd, widow of the most virulent racist of them all, had ‘diplomatic flu,’ he decided to surprise her in her whites-only compound, arriving in his helicopter and knocking on her door, and appeared later with her in a smiling photograph...

Instead, this man who, when told by his staff that they were changing the name of the Parliamentary office building named after Mrs. Verwoerd’s husband, suggested they hold off until his widow had passed on. ‘There is no need to hurt her unnecessarily. It can wait...’

This man who, when told that one of his personal armed bodyguards had links with a far right-wing racist group and had been removed, said, ‘I don’t think we should do that. He is young and immature and it will destroy him. Let’s give him another chance...’

The questions raised by the presence of John the Baptist are so apropos for the season of Advent. What passions motivate our choices and values and actions in this world? Might we be on the wrong track? Do we need to make a mid-course

correction that will lead us and those we impact toward life? How will our manner of living be consistent with grace rather than judgment?

I pray that such reflections in this fine season will prepare us again to receive Jesus in deeper ways, in ways that ignite an inextinguishable flame of hope and love and grace in our hearts and in our actions.