

“Dear John”

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12-8-19 2nd Advent

Based upon Mal. 2:17-3:7; Matt. 3:1-12

I wrote a heartfelt letter this week that I want to read to you. As I do, think about whether your heart felt the same way after hearing today’s text about John the Baptist.

Dear John,

I am sorry to have to do this by letter, but I need to tell you something. I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but I think we should spend the holiday season apart. It’s not you; it’s me. You are an amazingly faithful guy, obviously, spending all your time out in the wilderness, dressed in fur and living on bugs like a prophetic Bear Grylls. Your courageous ministry has always been very impressive to me and to many. I just don’t feel up to dealing with all your negativity this year. These few weeks of Advent, which already feel rushed because of Thanksgiving being late this year, are the only weeks of the year we really get to focus on joy. These are the days for trees and twinkle lights. These are the days we have society’s permission to overindulge in Christmas cookies and music, and get to think about faith in a warm fuzzy way, grateful for the fact that the babe in the manger made it clear that God loves us just the way we are. But when you’re invited to the party, all you bring is anger, judgment, and name-calling. Honey, we already have more than enough of that in our world; and we already spent weeks being criticized by Jeremiah this Fall thanks to the Lectionary. Enough with the fire and brimstone already! I don’t want to preach it and people don’t want to hear it. I’m sorry to get personal, but you’re just too much of a downer this time of year. I tell you what: how about we get together again during Lent instead? I know I’d be more open to your wisdom then. Just think about it; and in the meantime, I say this sincerely and pray for it enthusiastically: may the *peace of Christ* be with you! Elizabeth

What do you think? Feeling the same way? If so, you’re not alone. When I was talking to a friend about how reluctant I was to return from my weekend off only to have to step up to the pulpit to voice John’s harsh judgment of people of faith, she said, “Why not just skip him then, and preach on something else?” But here’s the problem with doing that. All four canonical gospels introduce Jesus through John. Not only does that mean that you can’t really understand who Jesus was and is without first going through John, it also means, as Barbara Brown Taylor observed when she equated John the Baptist with a Doberman Pincher that leaps out at you from an alley, that “in some way or another, the Doberman is God’s idea.”¹ You can’t skip over John and be faithful to Jesus. So, like it or not, here we are, back in the wilderness in all our “wheat-and-chaffiness,” listening to the voice of the one who fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy by calling on us to repent or face the consequences.

Interestingly, in John’s day, many of the things that we find off-putting about him are the very things that made him such a popular and charismatic figure in his day. He was every inch

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown, “*A Cure for Despair: Matthew 3:1-12*,” JOURNAL FOR PREACHERS, Advent 1997, 16.

the classic prophet— living in the wilderness where the spiritual ancestors of the Israelites had felt closest to God, dressing and preaching like Elijah, and offering people their own Red Sea experience by baptizing them into the promises of God. Nothing about John’s ministry was convenient or comfortable, and yet people still went miles out of their way to hear him because he preached that the Kingdom of God was near, and they wanted that to be true more than ever.

According to today’s text, even some Pharisees and Sadducees went out to hear and to see him, which tells us, at the very least, that John was something special. Scholars disagree as to their motives. Some think that the Pharisees and Sadducees recognized that John was clearly a real prophet and therefore either wanted to be associated with his ministry, or wanted him to rubberstamp their own. Other scholars think that they were against what John was doing and went out into the wilderness to shut him down. Still others think that they may not have gone at all, and the only reason that Matthew says they did was that when he was writing his gospel, during the big divorce between the Jews in the synagogues and the early Christians, he was angry at the Jewish authorities and wanted to make them look bad. If that’s true, then we must be extra careful not to allow his hostility with specific Jewish authorities in his day to lead us into anti-Semitism ourselves, or to convince us that all of the Pharisees in Jesus’ day were bad, which they weren’t.

I think that there is probably some truth in all the theories. There probably were some authorities who went into the wilderness seeking John’s endorsement of their power, and some who saw him as a threat to it. There probably were some who were genuinely drawn by faith to him because they recognized that he was a prophet. But according to the text, John did not separate them into groups before he greeted them all with an insult. “You brood of vipers!” he snarled. You don’t need to be a Bible scholar to know that calling someone a snake isn’t a compliment. But in this case, scholarship can help us to understand that it wasn’t just any old insult. For example, if we substituted his with the Monty Python classic, “Your mother was a hamster and your father smells like elderberries,” that would not convey the same disdain because John’s was actually a theological insult. Vipers were “unclean” creatures according to Jewish law; and the Greeks of his day believed that they killed their mothers when they were born. So, in effect John was calling the leaders who came to see him that day “spiritually unclean, God-killers,” a particularly vicious charge to make against people who made the Cleanliness Code and teaching about God their business. Then, in case they missed his point, John used scary eschatological and agricultural imagery of axes chopping down trees and wheat and chaff being separated and burned to accuse the religious authorities of spiritual hypocrisy. He wasn’t going to let them off easy with his baptism of repentance. If they wanted to be baptized, they actually needed to repent, and to demonstrate their repentance with their actions.

As I’ve mentioned before, repentance in the Bible is not simply saying you’re sorry for wrongs you have done or rights you have failed to do. It isn’t really about wallowing in guilt or shame either. The term repent in Greek is *metanoia*, which literally means “doing a 180,” or turning around, after recognizing that your eyes and heart have been fixed on something other than God and God’s way. Repentance is about reorienting your life away from your own ideals and longings and toward God’s. In other words, it’s about flipping secular Christmas preparations on their head by making this time before Christmas about preparing to please God

with our gifts, instead of dreaming about what we hope to get. You can see, therefore, why Advent was called a “little Lent” in the early Church. If you truly want to embrace Emmanuel-God with us– then you first need to be willing to face God with humble honesty, and a heart willing to change in response to the gift of God’s saving grace.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way. He said: “It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming so calmly whereas previously peoples trembled at the day of God, whereas the world fell into trembling when Jesus Christ walked over the earth...We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God’s coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God’s coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience.”²

John’s call to repentance is a call to take God’s claim on us very seriously. It is a call which is necessary, in our Reformed tradition, to balance Jesus’ emphasis on the saving grace of God. We emphasize all the time that we are saved by God’s grace, not our own doing. This leads many to wonder what the point of being good or doing good is. If God is always going to forgive us, why bother? The answer is, as John put it so vividly, because our actions still matter to God. They still demonstrate our faithfulness or lack thereof. John wasn’t willing to rubberstamp the Pharisees’ and Sadducees’ ministries just because they were “children of Abraham.” Righteousness doesn’t come by spiritual ancestry, he insisted, it comes from faithful living. So, if they wanted to be baptized, they needed to examine themselves, and change their ways, because he wasn’t in the business of offering cheap grace to anyone.

According to an interesting article I read about introspection the other day,³ the kind of self-examination he called for is actually a good way to achieve emotional as well as spiritual peace, which means that notwithstanding John’s insults, his message actually does go with today’s Advent candle. But not all self-examination leads to peace. Although there have been studies which demonstrate that people who understand the truth about themselves -- their strengths, weaknesses, hopes and fears-- enjoy stronger relationships, and have a greater sense of well-being, self-acceptance, happiness, and peace, some forms of introspection lead only to defensiveness or depression. For example, if all we ask is “Why?” questions when we make a mistake, or are criticized, or when things do not go as planned, (i.e. “Why did this happen to me? Why did I do that?”), we tend to jump on the easiest answer that’s plausible, which may or may not be the real reason. To make matters worse, when we think we have found the reason why, then we often use that to excuse our behavior or to confirm what we already believe.

This was evident in an experiment performed in the UK in which test subjects took a test, and then were given both positive and negative evaluations. Those who were asked to ask

² Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, “*The Coming of Christ in our Midst*,” as quoted on Plough.com, <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/culture/holidays/christmas-readings/the-coming-of-jesus-in-our-midst>, retrieved Nov. 27, 2019.

³ Eurich, Tasha, “*The right way to be introspective (yes, there’s a wrong way)*,” IDEAS.TED.COM, June 2, 2017; retrieved Dec. 2, 2019 from <https://ideas.ted.com/the-right-way-to-be-introspective-yes-theres-a-wrong-way/>

themselves why they received a negative evaluation were resistant to believing or learning from the evaluation. They cast themselves as victims. But test subjects who asked “what” questions instead, as in “What am I feeling now that I have heard those comments? What’s another way to respond to this situation? What can I do differently in the future?”, ended up both learning more about themselves, and growing from the experience. As the author of the article, Tasha Eurich, explained, when it comes to internal examination, not external examination of our outside environment, “Why questions can draw us to our limitations; what questions help us to see our potential. Why questions stir up negative emotions; what questions keep us curious. Why questions trap us in our past; what questions help us create a better future.”⁴

No one likes to be called a snake, and few of us who strive to live as faithful people day in and day out want to hear from anyone that either our understanding of the Gospel, or the way that we live it in the world needs to change. But since we can’t get to Bethlehem without first encountering John, then we might as well listen to his criticism of the people of great faith in his day, and use this season dedicated to self-reflection and spiritual preparation constructively, by considering what he would have to say about our own faithfulness today.

Knowing that we all fall short in our faith in some way, what do you think he would say we need to repent of in order to turn our minds and hearts back to God? The two biggest sins that historically have tripped up humanity and led us to believe and do things that were contrary to God’s way are pride and despair. If we think we have nothing to learn, if we think we do everything right, if we think we’ve got everything covered and don’t need any help, that’s pride. If we think nothing will ever change, that sin and evil are unavoidable, or that there’s no reason to hope, that’s despair. So, ask yourself this Advent season some good “what” questions, beginning with “What am I feeling this season?” Are you feeling prideful or caught up in despair? Secular Christmas preparations can bring out both feelings easily, as can the state of the world. Then ask yourself “What can I learn from Jesus about myself and the world from these feelings?”; and “What could I do, what could I let go of or embrace more fully to have inner peace or to promote more peace in the world?” Ask yourself what most often makes you forget about or resist God and God’s way, and what makes you feel closest to Christ. When you know the answer to all of these “whats,” then you will have a better idea of what you have to turn away from in the new year, and you will be able to be more fruitful in your faith.

As you do this self-examination, keep in mind two things, however. The first has to do with biblical imagery. John used scary imagery about axes and fires, and so did Malachi, whom Christian tradition has linked with John because of today’s prophecy. Speaking for God, who was fed up with the people saying evil was good, and with people who blamed God for human injustices, Malachi told the people of Israel that God would send a messenger who would be like a refiner’s fire and fullers’ soap. He would refine the people like silver, judging the hypocrites who lie and oppress widows and orphans and commit other sins. In those days, silver was refined by melting lead ore. The ore, which had silver mixed in it, would be melted until it was very hot. Then air was blown across the molten metal to oxidize the lead which rose to the surface, turning it into dross which could be blown away. When the refiner could see his image in the molten

⁴ *Ibid.*

metal, then he knows that all the dross had been removed. This is what we are seeking when we take the time to reflect on our faith and our relationship with our maker and savior during Advent. We are seeking God's help in getting the dross out of our hearts and minds so that we can reflect the image of Christ. So, don't be frightened by John's hyperbole. We repent primarily to experience spiritual cleansing in this life, not to avoid eternal condemnation in the next.

This is particularly clear when we keep the second thing in mind. Although John was right about Jesus being the messiah who would cleanse the world of sin, he was wrong about how Jesus would do that. John was a fire and brimstone kind of guy; Jesus was not. John wanted some people to be eternally condemned, Jesus did not. So, when John heard after baptizing Jesus that he was hanging out with sinners, not attacking them or the establishment, John wondered if maybe he had picked the wrong messiah. He sent messengers to inquiry of Jesus about this. Jesus told them to tell John, "The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleaned, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." (Matt. 11:5). Jesus was more gracious than John was ready to be; Jesus lived in the world, not the wilderness, and was both judge and savior in one. Therefore, we say may the "peace of Christ" be with you, even though the pathway to that peace lies in the repentance John preached. The one whose coming we await, the one who sees us as we really are, *and* as we truly could be, is our source of healing and hope and peace. Thanks be to God! Amen.