

Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12
"Hope of the World"
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We don't want to scare the children, do we? As I unpacked our boxes upon boxes of Christmas decorations yesterday I saw strings of multi-colored lights, fat little plush snowmen, a reindeer with a blinking red nose, flameless candles, a cow that moos "Deck the Halls", something called a tart burner, and some Santa doll holding a tree with snow on it.¹ There was no John the Baptist.

I opened one box to find all of our children's Christmas books inside. The boys absolutely love those books. We have *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Look Who's Coming to Our House*, *The Polar Express*, and *Santa's Noisy Night*. I flipped through them and saw the stories that make my children laugh and smile at Christmastime. I did not see John the Baptist.

Finally, yesterday evening we unpacked our nativity set. It's a white porcelain set rendered in exquisite detail. We unpacked the angel who overlooks the manger, the magi with their gifts, the shepherds and their sheep, and the holy family - Mary, Joseph, and

¹ I deliberately selected the tackiest and most ill-begotten items from our Christmas collection for this list. Heather would like me to assure you that we do have nice things, and our home is not full of such tacky decor.

the baby Jesus, lying in his manger. We did not unpack John the Baptist. After all, we don't want to scare the children.

You won't see a lot of John the Baptist at Christmastime. You won't find a plush John the Baptist doll in your boxes of decorations. You won't find him ranting and raving like a madman in the middle of a children's storybook. And you certainly won't see him standing in the back of the nativity scene with his wild eyes and camel's hair coat. No, we keep John the Baptist at a distance during this time of the year, and there's a reason for that. He seems very much to us like an intruder, and we'd rather not deal with him during our holiday fun.

Our traditional preparation for Christmas usually involve things like hanging Christmas lights, listening to festive holiday music, and surveying an abundance of material goods that we plan to either ask for or buy. We call these things "wonderful" and "magical", and cling to them year after year for the sense of nostalgia and cheerfulness that they bring us. But as we do we run the risk of missing that which is really wonderful and really magical, we come perilously close to making our own ideals and longings the center of Christmas. Be that as it may, we expect our

holiday preparations to contain a certain cheerfulness, a certain feel-good quality to them, and John the Baptist is neither cheerful nor feel-good. We meet him standing knee-deep in the waters of the Jordan River, wearing camel's hair and munching on locusts and wild honey. He calls out a stern warning to "Repent! For the kingdom of heaven has come near." Those aren't exactly warm and friendly words of welcome. When some Pharisees and Sadducees show up to be baptized, John lashes out at them, calling them a "brood of vipers" and warning them of the wrath to come. He proclaims that someone more powerful is coming, someone who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, someone holding a winnowing fork in order to separate the wheat from the chaff. The wheat he will gather into his granary, and the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

It's an off-putting message, and one that doesn't quite jibe with our usual pre-holiday preparation. John the Baptist certainly preaches a rather abrasive message, but it's also a very important one for us to hear during this season of Advent. After all, all four gospels tell us that the story of Jesus really begins with John the Baptist. All four gospels tell us that the path to Jesus goes through

that wilderness where John is preaching, and in all four gospels, John's message is pretty much the same: *Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand*. It's a message that can sound pretty terrifying to us, especially in contrast to our usual holiday fare, but it's absolutely essential to being a follower of Jesus.

John's message is one of *repentance*. Repentance is something of a confusing subject for a lot of Christians. Most Christians would tend to describe repentance as saying you're sorry, or confessing your sins so that God will forgive you. After all, isn't that what John is talking about when he warns about the wheat being separated from the chaff? Isn't he telling us to confess our sins to God, and be truly sorry for them so that we can be assured that we're in the granary instead of in the fire?

Well, not quite. That's not really what repentance means, at least not in the Biblical sense of the word. Theologian Marcus Borg writes:

The biblical meaning of "repentance" is quite different from an apology. In the the Christian Old Testament, "repentance" means "to return" - that is, to return from exile, to return to life in the presence of God, to a life centered in God. In the Christian New Testament, the

word "repentance" carries this meaning, and one more. The roots of the Greek word for "repentance" mean "to go beyond the mind that you have." So apology and repentance or forgiveness and repentance, are quite different. Apology and forgiveness do not in themselves imply change. Repentance does.² Repentance is first and foremost about change, a reordering of priorities both personal and public, a reorientation of all life to center on God. As you might guess, this kind of deep change is not the kind of thing that we can bring about through our own power.

What John the Baptist - and the season of Advent - remind us is that repentance is not primarily about our improving our own moral standing, but rather about God's desire to realign us and re-center us around our Savior. Repentance is not so much about our confession as about God's power to transform the world, to transform all of us into reflections of Christ's life. Every year in this season of Advent, John the Baptist comes along and proclaims repentance; he proclaims a return from our misguided desires, from our selfish aims, from the exiles of our own making, to a life

² *The Washington Post's "On Faith Panelists Blog", April 28, 2007.*

centered in God. This return, this re-centering, this *repentance*, is what God is doing in Advent.

It's no accident that our Advent journey leads us out into the wilderness where John is preaching. The image of the *wilderness* recalls memories of the joyous yet troubled history of Israel. God led the people of Israel out of bondage into the wilderness, where they feared that God had brought them to die. They sinned and rebelled and forgot God in the wilderness, but they also eventually learned to trust and obey God there. Despite their sinfulness and their disobedience, God led them through that wilderness, God delivered them from their exile, and God brought them home again. Our Old Testament reading for this morning was an example of this. Living in exile, the people of Israel were experiencing hopeless times. Isaiah likens them to a dead tree stump, yet in a stunning message of hope Isaiah looks forward to the day when a shoot will grow out of what seemed like dead wood. The shoot will be a righteous deliverer, one who will establish peace on the earth. The people of Israel heard Isaiah's words and looked forward to a better day. Today we hear Isaiah's words and look backward to Jesus, and offer ourselves up to God that we might be re-centered around the life of

our Savior. In Advent we remember and affirm that in Jesus Christ, God has brought each of us out of bondage and has fundamentally reordered our lives. There may be times when we are sinful, or rebellious, or forgetful of our God, but through our wanderings God persistently promises to keep pointing us in the right direction.

Today in our text, John the Baptist once again points ahead, toward what is to come. He helps us in our expectant waiting for the birth of our Savior, the hope of the world. And yet, as we enter John's wilderness, we find that we may only look forward by looking back. It's a little bit like how those ghosts in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* made Ebenezer Scrooge look backward into his past before change could happen in his present, and thus give him hope for his future. We too, are a little like Scrooge - not just Chuck, but all of us - in that we look backward to what God has already done, and it is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that promises to transform us in the present and give us hope for our future. Ultimately, this is why John's fiery message is not a message of condemnation, but a message of hope.

It's hopeful because we know how the story ends. It's hopeful because we know that on the heels of that wild and frightening preacher named John, there comes a Savior who will separate us from our sinfulness, a Savior who will burn away all in us that is terrible, and self-focused, and unfaithful, like the chaff that gets thrown into the fire, a Savior who will gather us in and establish ultimate peace and righteousness in his kingdom. This is the hope upon which our lives rest. This is the promise to which we are drawn every Advent. And this is the message of the wilderness: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!*

How aimless our Advent would be if there was no John the Baptist!

Thanks be to God. Amen.