

“Not Only From But To” – Mat 3:1-12 – Advent 2 – Dec 8, 2013

With all of the stuff that’s being said by politicians in the media these days it’s becoming harder and harder to believe anything that is being said. Whether it’s the mayoral gong show out of Toronto, or politics at any other level from any party in pretty much any country, one has to suspend belief in reality to accept the explanations and rationalizations that are being offered. I have difficulty accepting that these people actually believe what they are saying, but if they do then I am even more worried.

So, in that same vein, I have a really, really difficult task for you this morning. No, I mean, REALLY, REALLY difficult. I want you to take everything you ever thought you knew about John the Baptist, and stuff it away somewhere in the back of your mind. Why? Well, because I think some of what you know about John the Baptist probably came from Luke’s gospel. Do you remember the story about Mary’s cousin Elizabeth, and the baby that leaped in her womb? That’s Luke’s version. Luke’s version tells us that John and Jesus were cousins, and so we immediately assume they knew each other.

Not so for Matthew. In order to hear what Matthew wanted us to hear about Jesus, we have to meet John the Baptist through Matthew’s eyes, and we cannot do that if we keep seeing him through Luke’s eyes – especially if we keep seeing John the Baptist as a close cousin to Jesus. You see, in Matthew’s gospel there is no hint that John the Baptist ever even met Jesus. As we will see next week John, approaching the premature end of his life in prison, even had to send his own disciples to ask Jesus if he was indeed the one who was to come. In Matthew’s gospel there is none of that baby-to-baby sympathetic behaviour.

But for now, in order to hear Matthew’s answer to the question, “who is this Jesus?” we need to meet John the Baptist as Matthew paints him – and what a picture Matthew paints! In vivid images he presents to us a weird, crusty curmudgeon, dressed in harsh and self-abusing clothes, eating a strange diet that certainly did not include white bread or any other processed foods, breathing fire and brimstone with every utterance. Our minds fill out the picture of a scruffy prophet, from whom children and even dogs run in fear, an imposing man of God confronting the people head-on with words of scorn and messages of doom and retribution. No gentle picture from Matthew of two women in a country kitchen, but instead a sudden rending of the harsh desert sagebrush to reveal a thunderous and thundering prophet, a man who could have stepped right from the pages of the Old Testament – just as if he were Elijah returned with a fiery blast.

And there is the clue as to why we need to set aside for a moment at least the gentle images of a country kitchen of Luke, and pay full attention to the harsh, grating, confronting and challenging fiery picture from Matthew. Even though Matthew assumes that his readers already know of John the Baptist (hence the brief introduction) it is important to Matthew that the readers see him as indeed a prophet, ushering in the messianic age. For Matthew, that John is indeed the prophet of whom the great Old Testament prophet Isaiah spoke. It is vitally important to Matthew that we see John as a true and legitimate prophet of God in the true Old Testament sense, because only then will we be able to hear his proclamation of the one who is to follow him – none other than Jesus – to be true prophecy and thus a validation of Jesus as from God.

But again, set aside what you think you know about John the Baptist. It would be easy to assume from Matthew’s dramatic picture of this prophet that people would go out of their way to avoid him – but quite the opposite: John was a charismatic and popular man. Even according to Matthew great multitudes of people flocked out of Jerusalem and all Judea to hear him. The people must surely have heard the word of God being proclaimed by John, for they responded

both with confessions of their sins and with submission in baptism in the River Jordan. In spite of the bitter and vitriolic challenges John spewed forth to the Pharisees and Sadducees, even though he certainly comes across as a harsh and forbidding person, the crowds loved him, for they responded most positively to him. And of course that is another characteristic of a true Old Testament prophet, that the message he proclaimed was validated by the people, by the passage of time.

This was the message that Matthew wanted us to hear so clearly: this man, John, the Baptizer, was obviously and legitimately a true prophet of Scriptural tradition, was himself the fulfillment of prophecy, and proclaimed both that the messiah would soon follow and that the people needed to respond to his coming with repentance. According to Matthew the appearance of Jesus was no sudden surprise, no unexpected whim of God, but instead a fulfillment of prophecy, the sealing of a promise made long ago, and John's role in this planned event was to motivate the people to prepare.

And that raises two key questions: "why?" prepare, and "how?", both of which are also answered. The 'why' is due to the importance and the role of the one he proclaims as coming. "I am not worthy to untie his sandals", John tells us about the one who would follow. "I baptize with water, he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire", he adds, drawing images of judgment. Recall the expression Holy Spirit can quite literally be read as "Divine Wind", or even "breath of God", and would evoke instantly in the minds of John's public images of winnowing wheat, throwing it up in the air and letting the wind sweep away the outer coating, the useless chaff, to be raked into piles and burned. (Nowadays, that chaff is the source of your Bran Flakes, but we won't let that spoil the image of farmers on a Judean hillside.) Other images and analogies come to mind as well; for example in order for wheat to be winnowed, it first has to be flailed – i.e. clobbered with sticks until the husks are separated from the kernels, and how we perhaps have to get clobbered by life before we're ready to take our place with the other faithful kernels. Or perhaps comparing being "a lightweight in faith" – sort of "a Christian Lite" – as running the risk of being blown away. There is no end to the possibilities of confusing images that can be imagined.

What is clear and simple however is John's call to repentance, important because the one who is coming is coming from and coming with the complete authority of God, and will exercise judgment upon the peoples. The Advent of the Messiah means that the differences among persons and their futures will become evident. And so the second question, 'how?', becomes vitally important also. "Repent" is the keyword, but John makes it abundantly clear that what he means by 'repent' is not merely a simple confession of sin – "oops, my bad!" – but a complete change of heart, mind and life. "Bear fruit worthy of repentance", he proclaims, issuing a demand not only for conduct and activity appropriate to repentance and faith but also for integrity – the tree and its fruit must be of the same kind. In a declaration that would be echoed in the statement in James that "faith without works is dead" John reminds the Scribes and Pharisees that simply being Jewish by birth is not enough – "even God is able to raise up stones to be children of Abraham". We should consider that merely naming oneself a Christian is not adequate either – elsewhere we hear from Jesus that what really counts as the true mark of the Messiah (and those who would be called His) is living out the compassion and mercy of God – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, comforting the grieving and lonely.

It would be easy to hear John's fiery message of judgment, and to turn away feeling little hope, but to do that would be to miss the message of grace he brings as well. Grace? Can there be grace in such a harsh message? Oh, most definitely! We can be such negative people, can't

we? We hear John's call to repentance and immediately dwell on the "from". The word repent means to turn, to turn from something towards something. We can – and often do – get stuck on the 'from', dwelling on all of what might be wrong, instead of considering and even anticipating the 'to'. Repenting, turning toward the Messiah, to hope and a promise of the future, a future rich in the presence of Christ, a future secured in the new covenant, a future full of life and life abundant. John's call is to become unstuck from the past, to turn to a future with God in Christ. Yes, he uses colourful language and strong images of judgment and the possibilities of fire as motivators, but the essence of his call is to turn toward the one who would follow him as the true Messiah, the one who would deliver the faithful from the wrath. For John the Baptizer this was truly a pivotal moment in history.

We are also at a pivotal moment in the history of this congregation. As the dream of a new facility with which to minister to the community continues to clarify and solidify, we are poised at a moment of golden opportunity to look forward, to turn towards a future filled with the excitement, challenge and fulfillment of "bearing fruit worthy of repentance." It is a time in which we are fearful, but can you hear the clarion call from John urging us to turn towards a future filled with the grace of God made flesh in Jesus? Can you hear anew in this Advent season the promise of Immanuel, God with you? The one whom John proclaims as following him did indeed come, bringing a message of grace, mercy and life abundant. During this Advent season we celebrate the reality of that coming. But before we jump too quickly to the ooh's and aah's around the manger, we need to dwell at least for a while on the significance and the meaning of that birth. We need to hear – and heed – John's call to repentance, to turn to the future, leaving the past behind and moving forward into the grace and mercy of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. That is the true spirit of Advent, and of Christmas, alike.

Thanks be to God for his prophets, for his prophet John the Baptist, for the gospel writers, and above all for the gifts of the Holy Spirit and His Son Jesus Christ, whose coming we celebrate in this season of Advent, and in whom we place our faith and our trust.