

“Get Ready...” – Mat 3:1-12 – Advent 2 – Dec 5, 2002

I have a really, really difficult task for you this morning. No, I mean, REALLY, REALLY difficult. There is a story about one of the King Louis' of France that illustrates what I want you to do. Apparently the king was riding through the countryside of France, and came upon a small inn. He entered, and sat down, and the owner naturally enough bustled around the king in a total flap. “Bring me some chicory!”, the king demanded, and the inkeeper rushed into the kitchen and returned with a pile of chicory. “Bring me more chicory!”, the king demanded, and again the owner complied. This went on several times, with the owner becoming more and more agitated. Finally he broke down, and begged the king for mercy. “My Lord”, he wailed, “I cannot, for there is not a single scrap of chicory left in the kitchen!” “Good!”, replied the king, “now go and make me some coffee!”

Now for the difficult task for you. I want you to take everything you ever thought you knew about John the Baptist, and put it in a pile behind your left ear. Why? Well, everything you ever thought you knew about John the Baptist probably came from Luke's gospel. Remember the story about Mary's cousin Elizabeth, and the baby that leapt 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. As a kind of ‘sneak preview’, if you will, in next week's sermon we will see the answer to the second half of the question that is started here, namely, “who is this Jesus?”.

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 it is that Matthew paints! 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 religious leaders head-on with words of scorn and messages of doom and retribution. From Matthew we get no gentle picture of two women in a country kitchen, but 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 ushering in the messianic age, 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, for then we will 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.

We have to be a bit careful, here. 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 John the Baptist 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 vituperous challenges John issued to the Scribes and Pharisees, even though he seems a harsh and forbidding person, the crowds apparently loved him,

or at least 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, or at least over 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, himself the fulfillment of prophecy, and proclaiming both the message that the messiah would soon follow and that the people needed to respond to his coming with repentance. For 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 answered. The 'why' is due to the importance and the role of the one to come. "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 might 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 leading to 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". That is a reminder that naming oneself a Christian is not adequate either – and we will hear from Jesus next week that what will count 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. The one whom John proclaims as following 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 should dwell at least for a while on the significance and the meaning of that birth, we should hear – and heed – John's call to repentance, we should allow ourselves the opportunity to reflect upon what that judgment would be like for us without 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, the Advent of whom we celebrate, and in whom we place our faith and our trust.