

December 10th, 2017

Matthew 3:1-12 “Bearing the Light of Hope”

News comes to us in a variety of ways these days. I can look on my phone’s newsfeed app right now and read the most up-to-date news stories. I can turn on the TV and choose from a variety of cable news networks that will keep me up on what’s going on in the world too. Anyone remember the newsreels that were shown in theaters before a movie? Before that, you could get your news on the radio. All of those things are how we got our news in the age of electricity. But how did we get our news before that? Newspapers! Anybody know who published the first daily newspaper and when? Some people say it was a German newspaper that first went to press in 1605 called *Relation*. But others will say that the first newspaper was *Jobo*, a Korean paper that was first published in Seoul in 1577. But before that ... even before the printing press was invented in the 1440s ... all the way back before Jesus’ birth, people found ways to get news out to inquiring minds.

About 130 years before Jesus’ birth, officials in the Roman Empire would post daily news bulletins in high traffic areas like the Roman Forum. They were called – “Acta Diurna” or “The Daily Acts.” That even sounds like the name of a newspaper doesn’t it? They were written on stone or sometimes metal and would list the latest Roman military conquests, news about sporting events and gladiator matches. They even had birth and death notices. About 70 years later the Romans started posting “Acta Senatus” or “The Acts of the Senate,” which I guess was like the *Politico* or *Newsweek* of the time. These posts contained the “good news” or “euangelion” which is where the church gets the word “evangelism.” Unfortunately, that’s become a really loaded term these days. But in those days, the “evangel” or “the good news” was a way to let folks know all the good things that were happening in the Empire. Granted, it was propaganda, but still ... these publications were meant to inspire folks to say, “It sure is nice to feel safe and secure knowing that all is well in the Empire. Yay Caesar.” I’ve got to tell you, it’s been awhile since I’ve been able to look at my

newsfeed or a newspaper or to watch the news on TV and be inspired to say, “I feel safe and secure knowing that all is well in the world.” But here we are in this second week of Advent where we are encouraged to reflect on “Bearing the Light of Hope.”

Well thank goodness we’ve got John the Baptist this week! Nothing says, “Advent Hope” like John the Baptist. Nothing says, “all is well in the world” like a hermit who hangs out in the wilderness wearing camel hair clothes, dunking people in the water and eating locusts and wild honey. But you’ve got to give him credit. He had fans. People from all over the region would seek him out, confess their sins, and go down into the waters of the Jordan River so he could baptize them. You’ve got to figure that John was sort of a celebrity figure in order to attract the number of people that he did. He even got the attention of the Sadducees and the Pharisees who were sort of the mainstream ruling-class Jews in Israel at the time. John was far from mainstream though, so it was kind of strange that the Pharisees and Sadducees were coming to him to be baptized. And was John happy to see them? Was John rolling out the welcome mat and saying, “Good to see you brothers! Come on in, the water’s fine!”? No! He “welcomes” them by suggesting they crawled up out of a snake pit. He questioned their motives for seeking him out. He suggested that they were just out there for show and that they didn’t know the first thing about what it means to repent. He basically said, “Why did you even come out here today? You think that because you’re the ‘Children of Abraham,’ you’re immune to all the troubles of the world? If you’re so great, you’d be like a tree bearing good fruit. But you’re not and God has the axe laying right by the tree ready to cut it off from the roots and throw it in the fire. Is this sounding like a nice little story about bearing the light of hope yet? Smells kind of like hellfire to be honest with you. Sounds like John the Baptist isn’t being so “all means all” with these Pharisees and Sadducees. It *sounds* like he’s asking, “What are you even doing here?”

Okay, so if that’s the question on the table this morning, let’s just go ahead and ask it. “What are *we* doing *here* this morning?” Is it to

escape from the trauma of the “real world?” To run away from the stress that the headlines cause? Or maybe it’s the opposite. Maybe we came here to enter, even just for a moment, a world that’s somehow *more* real. A place that takes your reality seriously and addresses you where you are ... even if you’re afraid or hurting or in need of healing.

If this Advent season is about anything, folks, it’s about taking the voices that cry in the wilderness seriously. Sometimes those voices come from the “mad hermits” of the world like John the Baptizer who speaks up and tells the truth. What truth? The truth that the “real” world is a flawed. That our mad rush to accumulate and consume is killing us slowly. That our obsession with celebrities and other people’s drama are stealing our capacity to lives our own lives. I never really understood the definition of codependency. I thought it was, “Oh, I just can’t live my own life without you.” But then I found out the definition of co-dependency: It’s when you’re more concerned with other people’s troubles than you are with your own.” There are folks who put more energy and effort into other people’s stories than they do forging their own path. That’s codependency.

Here’s another truth that comes from the voice that cries out in the wilderness: “Things can be different than they are today. Why? Because *there is one coming who represents the Kingdom of God ... one who will baptize, not just with water like I do, but with the Holy Spirit.* He’s on the way, and is nearly here.” Here’s what John the Baptist promised folks out in the Judean wilderness: He promised *metamorphosis*. Not just *change* but *metamorphosis*. Isn’t that the same thing? No, not really. Change is when you quit using Colgate toothpaste and switch to Crest. Change is when you move from California to Colorado. Change is watching CSI instead of Law and Order. But metamorphosis? Metamorphosis is when a Neo-Nazi skinhead befriends a Jewish family whose love and acceptance turns him away from his hateful destructive beliefs and the lifestyle that is destroying his soul. Metamorphosis is when that Jewish family invites the skinhead to live in their home and help him get back on his feet

when he's rejected by his community and family for his change of heart. Metamorphosis is when an addict realizes that their addiction has left a trail of broken relationships and destruction behind them and they admit they are powerless and turn their life over to a higher power. That's the difference between change and metamorphosis.

A word that comes up several times in our scripture this morning is, "repentance." In the Greek the word is *metanoia*, which very is similar to "metamorphosis." The classic definition is, "to change one's purpose." Not just "to change one's mind," but their entire purpose. Again, this isn't change like, "I'm going to read the New Revised Standard translation of the Bible instead of the New International Version," or "I'm going to quit listening to rock and roll and only listen to gospel music." This is, "I'm going turn from selfishness, greed, envy, and jealousy, and walk the path of Jesus. I'm going to model my life after him in word and deed because I'm called to love others as God loves me."

In the church, we symbolize this repentance ... this change of purpose through baptism. In the early days of the faith, the church took baptism very seriously. Baptism wasn't just a ceremony designed to welcome people into the church when they reached a certain age so they could be "legit." Baptism was a powerful sacred moment where the candidate bound themselves so intimately to Christ, that everything they had been before they heard Jesus' call was literally cast aside in order to make room for the new life that Christ had promised them. The candidate would walk to the waters, remove their clothes, walk into the waters where the priest would baptize them and after they emerged from the water, they'd put on white clothes that symbolized the glory of Christ. No longer would they live by their own power. From now on, their old self was considered dead. The new life they lived embodied Christ who loved them and gave his life for them. There was no disconnect between the act of baptism and life itself.

When we are baptized, we pledge ourselves to Christ. Baptism is a

response to Christ's promise to be present in our lives and raise us out of the depths despair and into a new life marked by hope. This promise assures us that our time of penance ... our time of trying to handle everything on our own ... is ended and now it's God's turn to come to do the work of forgiveness and deliverance into freedom. Without this promise, all of our being sorry and all of our determination to change makes no difference.

In this we find out what Advent really means, as the season of *promise* par excellence: That within and beyond the chaotic mess of our greedy-seedy lives; within and beyond our self-hatred and despair; within and beyond the awful inhumanity of the way we govern ourselves sometimes; within and beyond all this ... Christ *arrives*. Christ arrives with enough peace and enough hope to make things very different.