“John’s Cry: Let every heart prepare Christ room”

Preached at Wollaston Congregational Church

On December 4th, 2016

Focus scripture: Matthew 3:1-12

John the Baptist lived off the grid, far out in the wilderness of Judea. It was a bare, scrubby place, where the wind whistled at night blowing up sand and grit. He wore camel hair cloth, perhaps woven by the local nomads. He would not tolerate the cloth produced in the sweat shops of the Roman empire. He also eschewed the empire’s tight control on agricultural produce, and lived on an unappetizing diet of locusts and wild honey. [[1]](#footnote-1)

The John the Baptist of Matthew’s gospel appears, without explanation, in the desert. Last week we learned of his birth in the story from Luke’s gospel, but there isn’t any more background in the scriptures. No explanation of how he grew into the man he became. How he separated from his father’s devotion in the temple, to stand in opposition to collusion with the Romans.

John lives on the margins, geographically, religiously, and in time. In many ways John *is* Advent. He whole ministry centers on the coming of God to the world in the person of Jesus. He appears at the very end of the era of the Old Testament, proclaiming that the Lord is near, and, as far as Christians are concerned, he is right! John is not afraid to give up his place in the spotlight the moment that the One greater than him appears. He sees himself purely as the forerunner, and the announcer. He is committed to his task of preparing. Whatever word from God led him to do this … he cries out, with a passion, calling people to repentance, calling people to prepare the way of the Lord.

For our 21st century ears, this scene may sound a little intimidating. John seems weird, his message is off-putting. He reminds me of loan souls I’d see in my home town, ragged and unkempt who’d hold their hand-made signs and call out “the end is nigh.” These folk were given a wide berth, as the crowds made their way through the damp streets, seeking out Christmas gifts from the brightly lit stores.

A call to repentance, the coming of the Lord, jars in our pre-Christmas culture.

It is shocking because instead of celebrating tradition and sameness, it calls for deep change in the hearts of the hearers and in the culture.

I have been studying resistance to change recently. Mostly, people will tolerate the status quo, however dysfunctional it is, rather than make a change. The pain of “business as usual” must vastly outweigh the perceived pain of the change, for it to happen at all. I spoke recently with a friend who has given up smoking. She had reached the point where the threat of serious health issues outweighed the pain and suffering of quitting the habit. She had finally had taken the leap.

In John’s day, people of Jerusalem and all Judea were flocking, to hear him preach and to be baptized in the waters of the Jordan. Perhaps the people had reached a point where they were simply longing for God’s intervention. Their oppression under Roman rule was so intolerable they were ready to welcome apocalyptic events, and even to prepare themselves for this in-breaking of God.

But maybe that’s not so difficult to understand in our times too. In the election season just gone, there were two candidates who appeared a little “off grid” politically, in very different ways. They attracted a great deal of attention: one on the left, one on the right. During the time of their campaigns, we began to hear that many people were calling for radical change in the political system.

All the same, I am still a little incredulous at John’s ability to preach in this prophetic way … to bring people, all the way out of Jerusalem into the desert. Perhaps I have preacher’s envy. I can barely get people out of bed for 10 am on Sunday morning, to come to a cozy, attractively decorated church. Even with the draw of Advent candles, beautiful music, familiar carols, it’s a struggle.

Advent is a time when I find I identify a little with John. Now, I have to admit … if my family were here they’d be falling off the pew laughing right about now. They know my mixed feelings about sleeping outdoors, my fondness for my downy and spotless duvet at night, my daily need for an electrical power supply, my attachment to the heated seats in my car and I won’t be adopting a diet of bugs and honey any time soon. I’m really not an “off the grid” kind of woman!

But, like John, I am an Advent person. Partly, I think, I don’t do well with the over-stimulation of the holiday season. I recoil as the lights go up in the malls and the music plays relentlessly. It was even happening in my dentist’s office this week! I push back against the onslaught of premature holiday excitement and Christmas merriment. Advent is a refuge for me.

While I may not be venturing into the Judea wilderness, I walk out into the woods of Massachusetts just to breathe. Places of solitude are places of revelation for me. In the quiet I hear the wind rustling the trees, the ducks and geese call out to one another. Perhaps there will be even a little snow, just a little, to soothe my soul. In these raw months of thin light, I find my “thin place” … the place where the heaven and earth seem to come a little closer. In many ways the whole season of Advent is a thin place for me.

And it is in this way, that I relate to John, and I can begin to understand his call to repent and prepare a way for the Lord.

But what will that look like for us?

How would we express that message in this church?

We mainline Christians tend to look down on the mega-churches who pull in large numbers of worshipers. We see their approach as “church lite.” We think of their music as repetitive and unsophisticated. We find their worship styles flashy and performance-oriented. When we learn of these vast complexes, with their coffee shops and fitness centers, we accuse those churches of superficial Christianity, running businesses instead of being church.

We should be aware, though, that the call to repentance in such places is real. It generally requires that an individual accepts Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and savior. From there on the church supports that person, providing classes and counseling if needed, helping the new Christian make necessary changes and grow in faith.

We mainline Christians would do well to look at our own ways too. When we invite others in, we tend to tell people to come for community, or to “get involved.” We vaguely mention that we enjoy the music or are inspired by the sermons. We rarely mention any life changing experience.

A year ago the United Church if Christ posted a promotional meme which posed the question “what do you need on Sunday morning?” The accompanying graphic

shows a Starbucks-type paper coffee cup with options to check off, like drink choices: music, community, love, inspiration, donuts.

UCC minister and author, Emily C. Heath, critiqued this advertisement, making the point that people can get all of these things in places other than church. There are plenty of coffee shops, yoga and meditation classes, TED talks, and community groups.

Rev. Heath reminds the UCC that we are the United Church OF CHRIST, suggesting that in this promotion, they are “throwing the baby Jesus out with the bath water.” Rev Heath goes on to say

“I come to church to worship God.

I come to experience the awe that comes in knowing of Christ’s grace.

I come to hear the Word and receive the sacraments.

I come to be better equipped to serve God’s world.

I don’t come for the donuts.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

John the Baptist had no donuts, he had no choir, or power point, he didn’t even have an inspirational sermon. He simply called people to repent, to turn toward God. Repentance means a real change … a heart change. It means turning away from the things that keep us from relationship with God and with one another. That is different for everyone

Maybe for you, like me, it includes turning away from wasting time on social media, following the aptly named “click bait.” Or maybe, it’s curtailing addictions to food, or drink, or some other substances, that fill the space that was supposed to be there for Christ. Or maybe it means saying “no” to the hyper-busyness that over-fills our lives right now. It means admitting that the world will keep on turning without our being responsible for every little thing.

For me the heart change is different from the mega-church’s “once and for all” acceptance of Jesus as personal Lord and savior. My repentance involves turning once, and turning again, and turning yet again. Each Advent season we are called to repentance again. Each Advent we are called to make the way straight for the coming of Christ.

In the passage we read today, the image of Jesus is not the baby in the manger from the tender nativity scene. John is already looking forward to the final coming of the Christ, who will make all things right. John is looking forward to radical transformation.

You see, in Advent we are not only preparing for the baby in the manger. We already have plenty of room for in our hearts for a newborn. The Advent we are preparing for is all together more wonderful, more radiant, more transformative than we could possibly imagine.

And so, if you invite someone to church this Advent season or this Christmas, don’t only tell them we have coffee, or music, or treats, or sermons. Tell them all that. But also tell them we have something here that they will not find anywhere else. Tell them that this isn’t just a pretty sanctuary, we are not just a warm and friendly community of friends. Tell them we are waiting expectantly for the coming of the Holy One of Israel, the Prince of Peace. Tell them that we are willing to make a heart change, to make Christ room, and challenge them to do the same. They might just be ready for a heart change too.

Amen

1. James Carroll, *Christ Actually: The Son of God for the Secular Age*, (New York, NY, Viking, 2014), 157 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Emily. C Heath, “On throwing the baby Jesus out with the bath water”<http://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2016-02/throwing-baby-jesus-out-bath-water>, accessed on 12/2/16 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)