

ADVENT 3C 2024
Immanuel Highlands Episcopal Church
Wilmington, Delaware
December 15, 2024

The two middle Sundays in Advent focus our attention on John the Baptist, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and a cousin of Jesus. He is considered the last of the type of prophets found in Hebrew Scripture, and the forerunner of the Messiah. The Gospels tell us that John lived and preached in the wilderness near and in the Jordan River. He reinterprets a familiar cleansing ritual that had been in use for centuries when converts joined Judaism. He baptizes Jesus, the meaning of which we'll consider in a few weeks.

John's description and his own words tell us that he does not fit the category of a refined gentleman, and he definitely did not pass or even attend the Dale Carnegie course in making friends and influencing people. He doesn't have time for that. He wears a cloak of camel's hair, not the same as a camel hair coat, mind you. He eats what he can find growing wild, a favorite seeming to be locusts with a wild honey sauce. Not something you'll find at a local drive through, although some trendy entrepreneur may be tempted to try to do that. Coffee hour suggestion?

John makes folks curious. He's not really an outsider. His father was a priest serving in the Temple. But his message and demeanor arouse interest—and suspicion. He challenges authority, and is none too subtle about it. Seeing some religious authorities nearby, he yells out, “you brood of vipers . . .” I doubt it was warmly received on the banks of the Jordan, although it could serve as a call to worship in certain places in the hollows of West Virginia and eastern Kentucky.

Imagine a lone figure, unwashed, unshaved, wearing ragged clothing, standing in Brandywine Creek calling all of Wilmington to repentance. Why, folks from as far away as Hockessin and Chadd's Ford might even show up to see what's going on. I wonder how that figure might respond to our own queries. Then, I wonder if we might care to stop to listen to him, or just go on about our business with a “nothing to see here” attitude.

To imagine someone like John calling out to us, we have to imagine ourselves in a time and place where life isn't easy, when we're continually looking over our shoulders to make sure someone isn't ready to pounce on the slightest misdeed. We see a type of that behavior when drivers slow down to the speed limit when a curve or hill is ahead, just in case a trooper with radar is out of sight.

Another thing we'll have to do is be aware of those aspects of our lives that call out for repentance. John's urgency is due to the imminent arrival of the promised Messiah. We've been waiting for the return of the Messiah for quite some time, so maybe, to continue the analogy, it's not on our radar.

I think that our own reality is that we've basically given up on the Messiah's return, so we look for another to fill the position. I've wondered about that through several election cycles, and have heard the rhetoric about a particular candidate being chosen by God. This falls in my "be careful what you pray for" listing, because scripture tells us that, while there are many who are chosen by God who do good things, God has also chosen some because, well, we need to learn a lesson. We must remember that God chose Nebuchadnezzar, too.

But we make those bad choices when we look to only serve ourselves, only to discover to our dismay that our prayers have been answered and the consequences of our choice are not what we hoped for. Yet, even then, we'll probably turn a deaf ear to the call to repentance, instead blaming others for our own actions.

To our surprise, we might find that God turns our sin into a place to do ministry. Look at the lasting effects of enforced poverty, of ways of life that offer a quick fix instead of a lasting solution. Look at how we've established ways of living that are based on long-held biases against those who differ from us. Look at how we force others to live so that we might save a few dollars by paying a sub-standard wage in order to get cheaper clothing and food. Take a hard look at how we've taught that it's okay to abuse, even hate those who question identities based on gender and sexuality, or just happen to be born something other than white and male.

And we wonder whether John of the Brandywine might have something to call us to repent for. Maybe when those priced out of affordable homes no longer suffer the indignity of the removal of a bench to sit on because luxury apartments are going up down the street, we can wonder. Maybe when those who cannot tolerate being in an enclosed space because the last time they did, a war-time enemy attack caused that place to explode and they barely made it out alive, we can wonder.

Maybe when a struggling young adult discovers that, even if he or she is honest about who they are, there's still food on the table and a warm place to sleep in the home of those who are supposed to love them most, we can wonder whether we as a society need to repent.

Now, you may be thinking "I didn't do those things. Why should I repent?" Many of those things are done by those we choose to make decisions for us, and they are often made in the name of the same one we claim to follow in this place. If we don't acknowledge the need for repentance on our own part, we deny the opportunity to grow as a community with those around us who seek the life-changing truth of the Gospel.

Maybe, when the full reign of the promised Messiah is finally established on earth, John can take a break. After all, when that happens, the true people of God will live in the fullness of redemption. Maybe, when we repent of the idea that those will be folks just like us, they'll ask us to join them.