

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Houston
Advent 2(A), December 5, 2010
Matthew 3:1-12
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On this second Sunday of Advent, we are not yet halfway to Christmas. As Murray reminded us last Sunday, that's the goal we and the rest of the world want to grab, Christmas, not Advent. We are not purists, most of us. We are both waiting and not waiting. You know we're gonna do the lights and dude up the house before Christmas Eve. We're gonna shop for presents, whether modestly or lavishly. We say we're waiting. We're trying to slow down, pray, not go nuts. But we're moving steadily toward the crèche; those candles; those warm, familiar carols; the smells and sounds and sights of Christmases past; light out of darkness; new life; new hope. Even if it's 80 degrees out and we're sweating, we're gonna do it.

This Gospel reading smacks us. It immerses us in another, equally ancient Advent tradition: preparing for Christ's second coming. In this reading John is a grown-up and Jesus is too. John's tone is urgent and the stakes are eternal. We'd better straighten up or there will be hell to pay, with the strong suggestion that sweet baby Jesus will bring it. No cross, no baby. No judgment, no mercy. Take that, Santa.

The story of John is woven throughout the story of Jesus. Luke even says they were related and knew each other as babies. John had a mission to call people to repent of their sins, and he sealed the deal by immersing them in the Jordan River. He baptized Jesus at the start of Jesus' public life, even though he may have been hesitant about doing it. He got jailed for pointing out that King Herod's wife was actually forbidden to him by Jewish law, then got beheaded when she got mad. At one point, when he was in prison, he sent some disciples to ask Jesus whether he was the Messiah or whether they should keep waiting.

It's interesting what Jesus answered. He told John's disciples to tell him about the miracles: the blind seeing, lepers being cleansed, the deaf hearing, the dead rising and the poor having good news preached to them. Not so much on the fire or the burning chaff, though Jesus too preached the need to decide for the Kingdom of God, and the relationship between life on earth and consequences after death. I wonder what John thought of that answer. I wonder if he could recognize the Messiah without a sword, whose disciples had dirty hands, who liked a glass of wine. We don't hear any more from him.

In today's story, John chose the wilderness, site of Israel's deliverance, for his message of repentance and purification. About him, all four Gospel writers quote words of the prophet Isaiah, originally predicting the joyful return of God's people to their homeland. John's crazy costume is straight out of the wardrobe of Elijah, the prophet who never died but was taken up into the air, who Malachi predicted would reappear before the day of the Lord. His diet of locusts and wild honey was wacky, but didn't break any known food laws. He was drawing crowds for miles around, including lots from Jerusalem, site of the Temple, where the Rome-friendly Hasmonean priests had a rather different program of forgiveness and restoration to God's favor.

And up walk the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Besides their most famous disagreement about the resurrection, they had others. The Pharisees, who weren't priests, sought relationship with God through full obedience to the written and oral Law, with Jewish laity even taking on some requirements that once had applied only to priests. The Sadducees, whose name may come from the name Zadok, Solomon's first priest, thought things would be better if they were in charge of the Temple instead of

the Hasmoneans. What they had in common with each other, John and Jesus is that they were all looking for a way forward for God's people in a blurry context of foreign domination, fragile institutions and deep hunger among the people for an authentic expression of faith.

We're not sure why the Pharisees and Sadducees come for baptism. Are they curious and checking out the competition? John clearly believes they are leading people in the wrong direction and that they are as cursed as the serpent God punished in Eden. You can't repent just by obeying more laws. Offering better sacrifices won't fix what's wrong. It doesn't matter whether you kiss up to the Romans or who your father was. You need to bear fruit or get chopped down and burned, and it's going to happen fast.

When I hear John, I feel as if he's about to pop a vein. Not to digress, but I've been there. Especially parents may relate to the kind of exasperation that makes discipline get shrill and even a little mean. We know rationally that forgetting a social science textbook doesn't really mean your spawn is going to flunk out of school, work at McDonald's and live in a ditch, but I'm not the only one who's been tempted to say so. Why? TO GET THEIR ATTENTION! When the prophets have said it time and time again without the looked-for impact, the threats (of course I mean consequences) come out. Go ahead—keep thinking of repentance as a box to check off instead of a new life with power to live it. I've had it. Flunk out of school. Let your teeth rot. Your tree's gonna get chopped and burned. And just wait till the Messiah gets home.

I think it's pretty clear Jesus was greater than John, just looking at these narratives. John threatens that Jesus is going to gather the wheat together and burn the chaff, when chaff normally just floats away in the wind. It almost sounds vindictive. Compared to narratives about John, the stories of Jesus are warmer, more intensely personal, with a more even balance of compassion and severity, joyful with the repentant and almost sad when judging. And Jesus does judge.

Is Jesus who John was expecting, any more than he was the Warrior King Peter expected? Did Jesus do what John seems to predict he would? Are the days we live in the last days, or is there no special urgency about repentance and amendment of life? Am I to live each day as though my mortal soul depended on it, or believe that hell could be empty, or both?

With these two Advent candles lit, the Christ child on the way and John yelling, I think the Jesus we are expecting may not be exactly the Jesus we are going to get. He may not be as scary as John but he's also not as innocuous as the baby. He is the one who knows you've been married seven times and the one you are living with now is not your husband. Who defends the woman who wastes all that money on perfume for his feet. Who loved Lazarus so much he pulled him back out of the grave, weeping. Who stood up for lazy, wide-eyed Mary, who wouldn't bustle with her sister. He chose weak, fearful Peter to found the Church. He goes back to Jerusalem knowing he will die. He forgives the thief. He cooks fish on the beach and makes Thomas bloody his hand so that they all know he is alive.

This Jesus is not tame, or simple to peg as a wimp or a crazy man. Today he is coming, and he is coming again. We say it every week: Christ will come again. Your Kingdom come. Ask with the bracelet-wearers, What Would Jesus Do? Not only as a spur to your own better choices but to give you eyes to see him in too-familiar places, as infant or judge, when he comes. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus.