

December 8, 2019 Fifth Sunday of Advent
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GOSPEL

Matthew 3:1-12

The holy gospel according to Saint Matthew, the third chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

¹In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’ ”

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Well...the tree is up and beautifully decorated here...
and maybe at home for some of us...
but today makes me wonder...

A shimmering tree stretching up to the ceiling
may not really capture the spirit of this season.
Even a scraggly Charlie brown branch might be a bit too much.

We'd be closer to the spirit of Advent
if we put in the middle of our living rooms a cut-off stump...
maybe with an axe buried deep in its rings...
beginning to rot at the center...
maybe some bugs and dead leaves strewn around for good measure.

Between John and Isaiah...we are reminded today...
not only of what is promised...
but that we receive the promise in the middle of death and decay.

We are the children of hopelessness
that are still connected to the source of all life.
Our spiritual ancestors are not only the brave and the hopeful ones...
but also the ones who huddled at the end of Mark's gospel in fear
and didn't speak a word of what they heard....
because they were too afraid.

Today, we wait in a hope that doesn't know the end of the story, yet...

So today, we wait...
drawn out into the wilderness by a teacher
who is as strange as he is magnetic.

This third to last Sunday in Advent
always seems to belong mostly to John the Baptist,
though he wouldn't probably want it that way.

John is important enough
to capture the attention of all four gospel writers...
but enough of a supporting character
that we tend to think of him in fairly two-dimensional terms.

He's mostly the weird hippie with the scratchy clothes
that eats bugs and preachers fire and brimstones out in the woods, right?

But a friend of mine asked a question this week
that made me wonder about that...

Can you imagine what John must have really been like...
not just to know how to find or weave cloth with camel's hair...
and catch bugs to eat...?

But what must he have been like to have both the confidence and calm
to approach a wild beehive...and harvest honey for food?
Bees all around...but not being startled into swarming...?

For most of my life I've been pretty skeptical of John
and the leaders like him...
charismatic...but barely accountable (or so it it seems)
to any institution.

He's always seemed like one of those magnetic leaders
who form near-cults of personality.

I worry about leaders like John...
because they can do as much harm as good...or more...

But...as I think about John breathing slowly and approaching the bees...
making himself smaller and less fearful...

I remember...that John is a strange combination
of that magnetism of leadership...and the humility of servanthood.

John, you see...as powerful a following as he had...
also knew that he would step aside one day...
fade into the background...
only be painted in two dimensions...
because his work was never about himself.

Somehow, he was able to walk a line that is so hard to find...
believing enough in his giftedness to call people out of their lives...
into the wild...into newness of life...
telling the truth about the change they needed
and also believing enough in his purpose
that he was ready to say good-bye when the moment came...
to pass the torch, as it were.

In the musical Hamilton,
Lin Manuel Miranda gives George Washington a beautiful song:
“One Last Time”...
where the first president of this country understands so poignantly
that his legacy will be in teaching patriots how to say good-bye
to even great leaders
because the dream of this fledgling nation
was that it would always have more hope
than one leader could embody or bear.

When he says he will step down, Hamilton says,
“They will say that you are weak.”
And he replies, “No they will say that we are strong.”

John knew that if what he preached was true, it would outlast him...
would reach beyond him.
So, he stood in his giftedness and did the work...
and then was also ready to step aside.

The kin-dom of God always contains both sides of this coin...
though few of us are able to truly live it.
Because it is neither simple nor easy.

Some of our egos are more fragile than our humility is strong.
And some of us struggle to find the confidence to live with the boldness of
someone who strides up to beehives and calls sinners to account.

Matthew's whole gospel will be this way...two sides of every coin.
As we stand at the threshold of the year of Matthew...
we will do well to remember that judgment and salvation
will always be right beside one another.
It will always be as difficult as it is joyful.

Transformation does not come easily.

John speaks of fire...that Jesus will baptize with fire
and not only the water of John's baptism.
While we may have images of fire and brimstone and burning as punishment...
that is not what John means.
Fire...is a force of purification...
it is a refinement...it brings transformation...

Fire was the way to prepare food that was safe...
to sterilize things in a world without alcohol wipes
and little purse-sized bottles of sanitizer.
It was how metal were refined of impurities
and made stronger, more beautiful.
It made things truer...It wasn't about destruction. It was about life.

And I don't say that...and neither did John...
in order to claim that all suffering is somehow part of God's refining plan.
Sometimes harm is just harm.

Yet, John is reminding the people who come

that to follow the one who is coming will be transformative...
deeply...fundamentally transformative.

Perhaps, in the domesticated church of this era...
we would do well to take a leaf out of John's book]
and offer an invitation that is also a warning.
Come to this word, this water, this meal, this life...
come if you are called...
and also know...
we cannot leave these encounters unchanged.

If you do not want your life turned upside down
by the one who is coming...you can turn back now.
Because he will change you in ways you can't imagine yet.

See that stump? That rotting, dead place?
The tree of life is about to sprout there.

See your life? Your small, complicated, messed up life?
God is about to plant the kin-dom in it.

Who are we? Are we almost there?

Child of God...we are...we are so close...and there is still so far to go.
But we will go together. And there will be food for the journey.
It won't be easy...but it will be more worthwhile than we've ever dreamed.

John knew...and so do we.
So we journey on.

Thanks be to God. Amen.