

Advent 2A 2025 Matthew 3:1-12

Sometimes when I get a little hot under the collar, I'll phone a friend and ask them to proof-read an email before I send it to make sure that I'm being clear and firm but not incendiary or offensive. John the Baptist either didn't have friends to help police his tone or didn't care. *You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?* This is another one of those appointed lectionary readings that surprises us in this Advent season, because it does not put us in the mind of eagerly awaiting the celebration of joy to the world and peace on earth. Then again, the world is often lacking joy and isn't very peaceful, is it? We've got a long, long way to go. And that, really, was John the Baptist's point.

We have more biographical details about John the Baptist than almost anyone else in scripture. We know where he worked: out in the wilderness. We know what he wore: a camel hide. We know what he ate: locusts and wild honey—probably the locusts were wild, too, I don't think they raised domesticated locusts. But as weird as all that is, John is only the latest character in the prophetic tradition, echoing Elijah and the other Old Testament prophets, who also dressed strangely and employed signs and symbols to underline their prophetic words. Elijah never died; he was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot, so the story goes, and the people expected him to return ahead of God's Messiah. That's why Jewish people, who do not believe Jesus was the Messiah, leave an empty chair at the dinner table—for Elijah. First century Judeans would have been thinking, if it dresses like John the Baptist and diets like John the Baptist, it must be Elijah.

John styles himself like an Old Testament prophet because he's there to do a prophet's job: to speak the word of the Lord that gives hope to the people, but also calls them to account for their departure from the will and way of God. Their prophesy was not fortune-telling but truth telling, and the truth is that there are consequences for not living as God has instructed us to live. John tells the people to repent—that is, to turn away from the path that they're headed down so they can return to the way of the Lord. And the people respond to John! There were quite a few people who recognized that their lives were not going the way they wanted them to go, so they confess their sins and are baptized by John as a sign that they intend to begin again, this time living according to the law of the Lord. Great. We might expect John to be overjoyed as he sees more and more people seeking out baptism, committing to repentance, preparing to welcome the one who John knows is coming after him—the more powerful one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

But then the Pharisees and Sadducees show up. The brood of vipers. Mmm, not nice. It's odd for the Pharisees and Sadducees to come together, because usually they fought with one another, and both groups considered themselves the only ones with correct theology and piety pleasing unto the Lord. These were the people who made it their life's mission to study and then

practice the law to perfection. If John is hearing confessions and baptizing people for repentance we have to wonder what the Pharisees and Sadducees are doing there, because although they were good at pointing out the specks in other people's eyes, they certainly would not have thought of themselves as having any need or reason to turn from the life they had been living in order to conform to God's law. John seems...unconvinced that these experts on the law are prepared to radically change the course of their lives in order to welcome the coming reign of God's Messiah.

That was always the predicament of the prophets: the kings, the priests, the people in charge always wanted to hear the good news of God's promised protection and provision, but never wanted to hear God's call to reform and righteous living. We haven't learned: How often do we say we want the world to change...but *we* don't want to change. We want change without having to change anything ourselves. I confess that at this time of year when we emphasize the longing for peace on earth, I think more about warring nations on the other side of the world than fighting factions at home, than arguments that I have with friends or family or colleagues. And for us to get from where we are to where we all want to be, even assuming that where we want to be is where *God* wants us to be...again, we have a long, long way to go.

I'm not surprised that John was suspicious of the religious leaders; after all, they were the ones who were supposed to be most knowledgeable about God's law; they were supposed to know how God wanted them to live and how God wanted them to treat others. The same could be said for us: can we really say we don't know what is good and what the Lord requires of us? But to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God? Isn't the problem just that we don't want to do it?

Whether it's the Old Testament prophets calling ancient Israel back to love and justice, or it's John the Baptist calling Pharisees and Sadducees to act like God's people, not just claim ancestry as God's people, or us looking at the chasm between where we are and where God calls us to be... there is still good news of hope and joy. The promise of Advent is the coming of Emmanuel, God with us. If righting the wrong and healing the division in our world seems as unlikely as wolves and lambs, calves and lions, cows and bears eating dinner together, perhaps it's because we're limited by our own imagination, by the systems in which we still participate, and by how we think the world could change without us changing ourselves too much. We still think we can solve cosmic problems with the same human attitudes and efforts that caused them and without too much inconvenience or discomfort or sacrifice on our part. Yet God comes to call us to a whole different way of thinking and living and loving and being—because we wouldn't even know where to start on our own. Yet that is still good news: God comes to us, so we are not alone. May God give us the strength to turn and travel that long, long road, walking in the way of Christ, not on our own steam, but empowered by the Spirit of God.