

1 Advent C

Malachi 3:1-4

Philippians 1:3-11

Luke 3:1-6

The text for the sermon comes from Malachi:

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

The writer, Anne Rice, best known for her book series, *The Vampire Chronicles*, asks this question about the Christmas story: “Is there a more beautiful love story in our literature than that of God coming to be with us, coming to suffer the mundane and vulgar indignities of our world?”

And she goes on to say that if “civilization as we know it” were coming to an end with predictable falling bombs and fleeing populations, as her most prized possession, she would bring along her nativity set. She writes:

“I’d take the Christmas crèche—the child, his quiet and patient, parents the ragged shepherds with their sheep, the faithful ox and the donkey, the Wise Men in their gilded raiment come to gaze in unquestioning awe.

I’d clutch those little statues to my heart, and hope to leave them somewhere safe where others might inevitably find them—gathered in their ancient configuration—and ponder the mystery of the child’s humble birth amid rich and poor, animal and human, snow and straw.

I can’t help but notice that when she’s talking about the figures that come into play in the nativity story, she leaves out John the Baptist. Well, and after all, he didn’t go to Bethlehem. He wasn’t on the scene. And yet—and yet, that nearly crazed figure of the John the Baptist is central to the story.

We’re told in Luke that his mother was Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth and that the two women are pregnant at the same time. But the gospel stories don’t dwell on John’s babyhood. After his birth the next glimpse we get of him is as full-blown weirdo. Matted hair, a loin cloth, eating locusts and raw honey and spouting out an angry-sounding message that seemed both threat and promise all at once.

“You brood of vipers,” Luke records him as saying to his followers, “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

But he also offered a message of profound hope, quoting the prophet Isaiah’s promise:

*Every valley shall be filled
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,*

*and the crooked shall be made straight
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”*

Once he started preaching in the wilderness, promising that the Lord was coming and people should re-direct their lives, through repentance and preparation, people left the temple and went out into the wilderness to hear what he had to say. They let him wash them in the river—even women, who were not allowed into the inner precincts of the temple, even recognized sinners who would not have even bothered to try to come into the temple at all. Something about John’s message drew people to him, despite his outward appearance and unorthodox style of doing ministry—in the wilderness.

That piece is important and shouldn’t be underestimated. We’re used to going different places to worship. It doesn’t have to happen in one fixed place. As far as people going into the wilderness to worship, well, most denominations have church camps of one type or another and that’s wilderness enough for some of us, particularly if there isn’t much hot water and the camp coffee is always burned.

But in John’s time, the faithful worshipped at the synagogue. They followed the teachings of scribes and priests, recognized men of spiritual authority. They didn’t willy-nilly go get baptized by someone who today we might think needed to have his lithium level adjusted.

So something drove them there. Drove them away from the city and the synagogue and the established mechanisms for understanding, worshiping and relating to God. Something drove the people to seek out a wild man in a wild place performing baptisms not sanctioned by the rabbis, declaring that Someone was coming—whose name he didn’t even know—was about to come in and change the whole established world order, so old rules, requirements and regulations didn’t apply.

And John wasn’t exactly gentle in his delivery. He wasn’t one to mince words. He called the religious authorities ‘a brood of vipers.’ He told his followers, flat out, that they had to change their ways. He said, “Even now, the axe 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.”

All in all, John the Baptist makes the fabled hippie culture of the 1960’s look pretty tame if you ask me. And I suspect that John was *not* the kind of man who would have been welcomed in most houses of worship during that same period.

So really, why did the people come? The Episcopal writer, Barbara Brown Taylor, says “People were drawn to him apparently not only because of who he was and what he said, but also because of what he offered them—a chance to come clean, to stop pretending they were someone else and start over again.”

Isn’t it interesting that the people had to find that freedom *outside* of the established order for religious observance?

It's interesting, I think, but not surprising. People have long noticed a divorce between authentic faithful living and the institutionalized version of it. That's why churches struggle, frankly.

I'm reminded of a cartoon I saw the other day. The title was "When Opposites Attract" and the image was of a dishy-looking woman with long legs sitting at a high bar table to with a haggard-looking priest. "And *I'm* spiritual, but not religious," she's telling him.

The implication is, of course, that the man of God, the man in the collar, the established authority, is *religious*. But that's it. Not *spiritual*. For that you have to look to the lively young woman trying to make a connection—that's spirituality: trying to make a connection.

John connected.

The very forms of worship designed to connect us with our authentic spirituality sometime becomes impediments to it. When we are so concerned with the *right* way to do Holy Communion, we miss out on Holy Communion. When we only notice the typos in the word of God, we miss the word of God. When our mouths are singing but our hearts are closed, we are silencing our song of praise.

And on top of that, we send a message that that is what worship is really about—being a critic not a supplicant. Adhering to the forms of worship, without worshipping, is not only not spiritual, it is downright false.

You know what I mean: form doesn't make up for content. It's right there in the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians: *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal...If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

No matter how many cookies you bake, you can't be a good parent if you don't try to see the world through your kids' eyes. No matter how many bouquets of flowers you bring home, you can't be a good spouse if you don't acknowledge how much you and your partner need to hold each other's well-being tenderly in your hands.

No matter how high your pledge is or what committees you serve on, you can't be a Christian until you acknowledge that you are the *body of Christ* and not some name on a line in a parish register in the pastor's office. You are the who of Christ in the world today.

Form doesn't make up for content, and John called the people to pay attention to content because the Lord was on the way.

And the Lord was coming not to their local houses of worship, but to the banks for the river where he, too, would be washed by John in the Jordan. He, too, would undergo the ritual cleansing that was the signal action of new life.

You know, all those Christmas carols about the baby, all those songs about bringing gold and frankincense and myrrh and rum-a-tum-tummying—I wish there were just one or two songs about what John is calling us to do. Because his call is

every bit as real and valid today as it was then. He's calling us into the wilderness, not the shopping mall. He's calling us into the wilderness, not the stable.

In fact, before we can get to the stable, we really need to go into the wilderness if we want to understand what preparing our hearts is all about.

It's different than preparing our Christmas cards. And repenting is a lot different than getting up early to get even more chores done. And bearing fruit is a lot different than resentfully doing what is expected of us.

Sometimes we need to hear that. Maybe a few carols about that wouldn't hurt, either.

We just need some encouragement to get ourselves out of ourselves long enough to go into the wilderness with John. He is, as the gospel of John puts it, "a man sent from God." He was our messenger then—and he still is now.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "The gospel always begins with a messenger, whether it is an angel whispering in Mary's ear or a parent telling a child a story or a skinny prophet standing knee-deep in a river. What strikes me about this messenger—this John the Baptist one—is that he was nowhere near and church, and those who insisted on staying inside the church never heard his message. Only those who were willing to enter the wilderness got to taste his freedom, and many of them were still there when the spectacular Someone arrived, far from the civilized center of town."

She goes on: "I reckon every one of us has some idea where our own wilderness lies, as well as a long list of all the good reasons why we should not go there. We are comfortable here, after all. We know the ropes. Why should we hunt for God anywhere else? I cannot imagine, unless it is that voice crying out in the wilderness, the one you cannot quite make out from here. If we only listen for God in church, we will miss half of the message. the good news is always beginning somewhere in the world, for those with ears to hear and hearts tot go wherever the way may lead."

Amen.