



From the Pulpit: December 4, 2022
Second Sunday of Advent

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Matthew 3:1–12; 11:2–5

In the Meantime, II: Are You The One?

On the second and third Sundays of Advent the Common Lectionary give us two stories on John the Baptist and I'm going to read both of those today for you.

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Now that is the beginning of John's ministry and Jesus. Jesus continues with his ministry and John continues with his. John's ministry lands him in one of the Pharisees prisons, and so the story continues in Chapter 11:

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

Well, as I said last week, there are lots of good reasons for avoiding the Common Lectionary, and I frequently do avoid it. For instance, every Advent, on our happy and innocent way to visit that harmless infant in a stable at Bethlehem, we first have to get past John the Baptist.

"John was mad at everyone about everything. He blasted the unctuous sanctimony of the religious authorities in Jerusalem."

Barbara Brown Taylor calls John the Doberman Pinscher of the Gospels. He wears a spiky collar and grabs us by the ankle and won't let go.¹ John was mad at everyone about everything. He blasted the unctuous sanctimony of the religious authorities in Jerusalem. "You brood of vipers," he rudely declaims, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the unquenchable inferno." "You're a snake," he bluntly opines.

He clobbers the unsuspecting innocents who come to him for baptism in the wilderness. "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand," he chides. "You're going the wrong way. You're thinking the wrong thoughts. Turn around and get right with God."

¹Barbara Brown Taylor, "A Cure for Despair: Matthew 3:1–12," *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 1997.

When I was new in the ministry, one of my best friends gave me a candid assessment of my personality. He said, “You take instant umbrage, and you have thin skin. That’s an unhappy combination. You see something that makes you mad, you take instant umbrage, and then when someone takes instant umbrage back, you get your feelings hurt.” He was probably right about that, and I’ve been working on it ever since.

John the Baptist probably didn’t have delicate feelings, but he certainly took instant umbrage. He blasted the smug Pharisees and Saducees, he clobbered the unsuspecting crowds, but mostly John took instant umbrage at Herod, Galilee’s Governor.

When John comes upon him, Herod is married to a princess, but then falls in love with Herodias, his brother’s wife, so he divorces his first wife and starts carrying on with his sister-in-law, who also happens to be his niece. John thinks this arrangement is somewhere between unseemly and obscene, so he takes a megaphone and blares an unholy racket up at the palace window, or posts it all over Twitter, or whatever the first-century Palestinian equivalent was.

When Hamlet’s father is murdered, Hamlet is pretty sure Uncle Claudius did the dirty deed to get with his mother Gertrude, so his **uncle** becomes his **stepfather**. “O most wicked speed,” he clamors, “O most wicked speed, to post with such dexterity to incestuous sheets.”² That’s what John shares with anybody who will listen.

It will not surprise you to learn that such brazen candor lands John in Herod’s dank, dark, dreadful dungeon. Later he will lose his head over it, literally.

²William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, I, ii, 156.

There are two reasons why these texts are God’s timely word to us via the Common Lectionary this very morning. John the Baptist may have been the Doberman Pinscher of the Gospels, but the world needs its junkyard dogs, right?

First of all, the world seems to have returned to the Age of the Herods. When the Berlin Wall fell more than 30

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years ago and the Soviet Union collapsed, we thought that democracy had won. It would spread across the entire world like a virus, and despots would disappear. But now in important places of power around the world, there are potentates imposing their puny, pompous prerogatives on citizens who should be free and equal.

In Tehran, the police kill women who fail to cover their hair, and if you think this is wrong and say so, they will kill you too. In Beijing and Hong Kong, it’s either the Party or Prison. You will pledge your allegiance to the Premier, or he will shut you up. Vladimir Putin hurls missiles at maternity wards and nursery schools. He’s a latter-day Herod, slaughtering innocents like at Bethlehem when Jesus was born. **That** was a different Herod. **That** Herod was **this** Herod’s father, but **this** Herod is a chip off the old block of **that** Herod.

Yet in all these places, there are brave if reckless protesters willing to speak truth to power at great cost to themselves. Thank God for them and champion their cause if you can. And also thank God you live in the world’s oldest democracy where we make our decisions together as free and equal citizens and have the right to disagree and stay out of prison for saying it. Distrust and oppose anyone who won’t count your vote, no matter whom you vote for.

So that's the first reason these texts about John the Baptist might be God's very word to us this very morning. The second reason is the haunting question John sends Jesus from his dank, dark, dreadful dungeon: "Are you the One, or should we wait for another?" We've been asking that question for 2,000 years, right?

"Are you the One, or should we wait for another?" John asks Jesus from his desperate confinement. There's Herod still on his high and mighty throne and there's Jesus' tooling about the Palestinian countryside telling his homey little stories about the lilies of the field and the birds of the air and advising his disciples to turn the other cheek and love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, not a message terribly helpful to someone in John's predicament.

"Are you the one, or should we wait for another?" Are you the one we've been waiting for for 600 years? Are you the Christ God promised would free us from servitude to one invading empire after another? And if you are, why is truth forever on the scaffold and wrong forever on the throne? John bet his life on Nazareth and now it looks as if he might have placed all his chips on the wrong color of the roulette wheel.

It's a great question. My friend Shannon Kershner at Fourth Presbyterian Church asks, "Have you seen the news lately?" A friend sends her a headline from *The Onion*: "Snowstorm in Chicago Delays Hundreds of Morning Murders." Another friend says, "I respect what you believe, but the world sure doesn't look very redeemed to me. Is this as good as it gets?"³

Some of you are here this morning because you know the answer to that question. You are here because you've seen that, in the words of Jesus himself, "the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor hear the good news."

But others are here not out of **commitment**, but in **investigation**. You are still asking the question "Is he the One, or should we wait for another?" You're not sure yet, and you want to know. Being here is an experiment, a quest for the right answer, and that's a good reason to be here, a high and holy exploration, the highest and holiest of your life. Don't ever stop asking till you get your answer.

I'm betting that you'll get there one day. Do you remember when Bob Cratchit comes home from church on Christmas Eve, and Mrs. Cratchit asks her husband, "And how did Tiny Tim behave in church, dear?" Mr. Cratchit replies, "As good as gold, and better. "Somehow he gets so thoughtful, sitting by himself so much, and thinks the strangest thoughts you ever heard. He told me, coming home, that he hoped people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant for them to remember on Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk and blind men see."⁴

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³Shannon J. Kershner, "Understanding the Question," a sermon at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, December 11, 2016, <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2016/121116.html>

⁴Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Octopus, 1980, originally published 1843), p. 63.

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

We open our eyes to this day
and come face to face
with the dizzying possibility of your presence,
Our Prince of Peace.

Our hearts are open as we long for you.
Our minds awake as we search our day,
our week, our very lives for
the texture of your spirit in our midst.

Our bodies know hunger and satisfaction
in equal measure,
our fast-beating heart furthering
the feeling of being alive in your divine love.

And so in silence and song,
in word and worship,
we search for you,
a perpetual presence ever-known, even now.

In the deepest worries of our week,
give us wisdom.

In the decisions we face,
fill us with your spirit of discernment.

As we face new roads untrod
and new grief unwelcome,
give us courage to take the first step,
with you by our side.

On even our hardest journey of the year,
allow us to arrive refreshed,
filled with the mystery of inner peace
as we welcome your invitation
to transformation.

May today's stranger-in-our-midst
become tomorrow's greatest friend.

And in this Advent Season
of expectation and waiting,
may we never be held back,
never put off,
never deferring or postponing our faith:
we watch,
we prepare,
we hold expectation and hope,
and we watch for your everlasting arrival,
your uninterrupted spirit
that was and is and will be born among us.

We wait for you with purpose,
for it remains true that your vision of justice,
mercy and peace are unfulfilled.

With every act of violence
and threat of force
in our community, nation, and globe,
we are reminded that we need you,
and that your deep longing for another way
is imperative.

Let your spirit of peace rise up
in the hearts of those
who are set to do violence to self and other.

Let there be another way.

Let your spirit of justice
rise up in the systems of government
that make do with injustice and inequity,
corruption and brutality.

Let there be another way.

Be on the battlefields
and wintering villages in Ukraine.
Be present amid
the international spotlight on Qatar.

Be too, in our own schools,
our own homes,
our own hearts,
our own burdened places
where your hope has yet to come to fruition,
the places in our lives
where we need to open ourselves
to the possibility of your vision in our lives.

Transform us.
Change us.
Rebuild us.
Rework us.
Renew us.

Stir up your hope in our midst.

And hear us as we lift our voices in the prayer of longing that Jesus
teaches us, saying: Our Father...Amen.

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