

The Third
Sunday of
Advent**Mr. David
Baylor**December 11, 2011
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"The humility of John the Baptist"

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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Psalm 126
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8, 19-28

John the Baptist! Given what we know about the end of his ministry (Mark 6:17-29), don't you think someone might have said to him at some point, "John, John, John! Boy, if you don't stop stirring up the hornets' nest of Herod's Palestine, someone is liable to hand you your head on a platter." (That's for those who may remember the 1953 Biblical epic, *Salome*, or the 1965 classic, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.)

For as long as I can remember, he's always been one of the most fascinating characters in scripture. Like the Old Testament prophets before him, everything we read about him shows him to have been an in-your-face kind of guy. I've never been able to decide if I wanted to meet him, or if I'd try to avoid the encounter, partly because of the directness and challenge of his message, and partly because, in the words of one of my favorite writers, Barbara Crafton, John was indeed an "odd duck."

There's reason to suspect that my interest in John the Baptist may actually go back to when I was just 5 or 6 years old. I don't remember this myself, but my mother used to talk about me standing on the front steps of our house shouting at the top of my voice: "I tell you people, if you don't repent . . . ! I'm sure I would not have said anything like ". . . then you're going to hell!" which would not have been appropriate for a small boy in small town Illinois in the late 1940s! But we did attend a Baptist church at the time, so I was probably very familiar with the kind of fire and brimstone preaching we identify with John the Baptist. So I can't dismiss the possibility that I may have been trying to channel some aspect of him, even at that early age.

Nevertheless, in spite of that connection, if I spotted someone today dressed as strangely as John was then – in camel's hair and a leather belt, as we heard in last week's Gospel from Mark, or perhaps the modern equivalent of a filthy and worn collection of rags we might identify with a homeless person on Second Avenue – I'd probably cross the street and detour a block or two away as fast as possible. In fact, I'm sure many of us have had such encounters with folks dressed a lot like John might be today on the streets of almost any major city. And some of these would even be calling out loudly for us to repent – and ready to hand us a pamphlet to assist with the process.

I assume that none of these particular "odd ducks" are really a modern John the Baptist, but you know, I can't be totally sure that one of them isn't either!

In a minute we're going to look at an aspect of John's character that we don't usually associate with him, but first I want to tease out a little more creative portrait of him. Maybe we can consider this like an early Christmas present. This is from another of my favorite writers and spiritual mentors whose provided me lots of insight and inspiration over the last 30 years, Frederick Buechner. You've also heard our rector mention him now and then. This particular bit is from a wonderful book titled *Peculiar Treasures – A Biblical Who's Who*, which I commend to you. But for now, settle in for a moment and listen to Buechner's somewhat off-kilter but still respectful and helpful insight into ". . . a man sent from God, whose name was John . . ."

John the Baptist didn't fool around. He lived in the wilderness around the Dead Sea. He subsisted on a starvation diet, and so did his disciples. He wore clothes that even the rummage sale people wouldn't have handled [and certainly not Cloud 9!]. When he preached, it was fire and brimstone every time.

The Kingdom was coming all right, he said, but if you thought it was going to be [high] tea, you'd better think again. If you didn't shape up, God would give you the axe like an elm with the blight, or toss you into the incinerator like what's left over when you've lambasted the good out of the wheat. He said being a Jew wouldn't get you any more points than being a Hottentot, and one of his favorite ways of addressing his

congregation was as a snake pit. Your only hope, he said, was to clean up your life as if your life depended on it, which it did, and get baptized in a hurry as a sign that you had. Some people thought he was Elijah come back from the grave, and some others thought he was the Messiah, but John would have none of either. "I'm the one yelling himself blue in the face in the wilderness," he said, quoting Isaiah. "I'm the one trying to knock some sense into your heads" (Matthew 3:3).

One day who should show up but Jesus. John knew who he was in a second. "You're the one who should be baptizing me," he said (Matthew 3:14), but Jesus insisted, and so they waded out into the Jordan together, and it was John who did the honors.

John apparently had second thoughts about him later on, however, and it's no great wonder. Where John preached grim justice and pictured God as a steely-eyed thresher of grain, Jesus preached forgiving love and pictured God as the host at a marvelous party or a father who can't bring himself to throw his children out even when they spit in his eye. Where John said people had better save their skins before it was too late, Jesus said it was God who saved their skins, and even if you blew your whole bankroll on liquor and sex like the Prodigal Son, it still wasn't too late. Where John ate locusts and honey in the wilderness with the church crowd, Jesus ate what he felt like in Jerusalem with as sleazy a bunch as you could expect to find. Where John crossed to the other side of the street if he saw any sinners heading his way, Jesus seems to have preferred their company to the W.C.T.U., the Stewardship Committee, and the World Council of Churches rolled into one. Where John baptized, Jesus healed.

Finally John decided to settle the thing once and for all and sent a couple of his disciples to put it to Jesus straight. "John wants to know if you're the One we've been waiting for or whether we should cool our heels a while longer," they said (Luke 7:20), and Jesus said, "You go tell John what you've seen around here. Tell him there are people who have sold their seeing-eye dogs and taken up bird-watching. There him there are people who've traded in aluminum walkers for hiking boots. Tell him the down-and-out have turned into the up-and-coming and a lot of dead-beats are living it up for the first time in their lives. And three cheers for the one who can swallow all this without gagging" (Luke 7:22-3). When they asked Jesus what he thought about John, he said, "They don't come any better, but when the Big Party Up There [emphasize capital B, capital P, capital U, capital T!] really gets off the ground even John will look like about two cents by comparison" (Luke 7:28).

Nobody knows how John reacted when his disciples came back with Jesus's message, but maybe he remembered how he had felt that day when he'd first seen him heading toward him through the tall grass along the river-bank and how his heart had skipped a beat when he heard himself say, "Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world" (John 1:29), and maybe after he'd remembered all that and put it together with what they'd told him about the dead-beats and the aluminum walkers, he decided he must have been right the first time.

Now I like it that in addition to calling John an "odd duck" and noting his combativeness, Barbara Crafton also reflects that John was an "extraordinarily humble man." This is a dimension of John I'd never really considered before, and I want to explore this a little in the next couple of minutes.

Barbara notes, "Many of us might have started believing our own reputation: Hey, maybe I AM the Messiah!" After all, as we heard in last week's Gospel from Mark, "people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins."

This could have been pretty heady stuff if someone wasn't completely grounded in his own part in the drama, as John clearly was. Remember that John had already embarked on his prophetic, "boots on the ground" ministry in the wilderness before Jesus actually appeared before him in person to be baptized. But, as Barbara Crafton continues, as forceful as John was, ". . . he was even more faithful." He understood that his importance had to diminish, that he had done what he was supposed to do, and that he was not in any way the one whose coming he foretold. Barbara concludes, ". . . the quiet terror of this state makes us admire John all the more: he's absolutely on his way out. . . And he doesn't cling, not at all. He faces into the strong wind of his own destruction and announces the new thing that will replace him."

Well, I'm kind of unsure about this business of facing into the strong wind of our own destruction, but if John could do it, then by God – and that's a crucial factor – I at least need to try. So this example of John has made me re-consider an old value, an old truth, an old challenge: humility. Now for those of you who have known me a long time, you won't be surprised that when I shared with Marge that I was thinking about talking about humility, she cocked her head and raised her eyebrows in a look that was either incredulous or amused, or both.

We have to be careful even in talking about humility. Attempting to attain humility can be a very slippery slope, in part because once we wake to the toxicity of our own pride, we also start to notice it everywhere else: for example, in the clever and critical voices in our media, or in our business or government leaders or our cultural icons who are unable to admit to failure or inadequacy or transgression, or perhaps in our friends and neighbors and – dare I say it? – even in some of our fellow parishioners.

In that regard, then, I stand here to offer my mea culpa for my own pridefulness and the lack of sufficient humility in so many of the things I undertake. It's far too easy to tell myself (and to try and convince others!) that what I presume to take on within these walls and in the world outside is motivated by only the best of spiritual intentions. But the likely reality is that I constantly seek to put on these identities largely to cater to my own pride. And a major problem with this, of course, as noted by the last of my spiritual mentors I'll lean on today, Thomas Merton, is that pride only makes us artificial, whereas humility makes us real.

There isn't time to look much beyond this this morning, but as food for thought over these next two weeks before we celebrate the arrival of the One whose coming John foretold, I wonder if we might give new thought to the identities we have appropriated for ourselves or which others have assigned to us. Can we consider whether we might supplant some of our pride in these identities with the humility that is necessary for us to embrace our most basic and most important identity of all – beloved children of a loving God, and brothers and sisters in his beloved son, Jesus.

Perhaps the simplest way to approach this initially is to take a page from C.S. Lewis, who noted that Christian humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. It is no longer to be always noticing yourself and how you are doing and how you are being treated in your identity. Well, to make this personal and to spare the innocent, or at least those who believe they are innocent!, these identities can certainly include things like worship coordinator or assisting lay minister or chalice bearer or Evensong officiant, or even a preacher probably taking far too much pride in a sermon on humility, etc., etc., etc.

Instead we could give serious thought to how we can work to better affirm that beloved child of God in ourselves and in those around us.

A few final words from Merton: "In a sense pride is simply a form of supreme and absolute subjectivity. It sees all things from the viewpoint of a limited, individual self that is constituted as the center of the universe. . . . Humility, therefore, is absolutely necessary if man is to avoid acting like a baby all his life. To grow up means, in fact, to become humble, to throw away the illusion that I am the center of everything . . ." to which I would add even those particular ministries or identities or issues or insights we may embrace or espouse here at St. Stephen's.

This is not to say that the work we do is not crucial – much of it may be absolutely necessary, in fact. But we should strive to do it by building up one another, and avoiding the alienation that infects far too much of we do in our modern life, even in the richest and most advanced nation we know, and yes, even in the most established of Christian communities.

One of the primary reasons Christ came to us was to help us heal this alienation, to bridge these chasms that separate us from God and from one another. This was at the very heart of his presence and his ministry among those who first knew him, as it was to all who have encountered him throughout the ages, and as it still is to us here today – if we can but loosen the bonds of pride that enslave our hearts and our true identity, and release ourselves to the same humility to each other and to God that John understood and accepted.

Amen

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