

Advent 2, Year A: 5 December 2010

In Advent, many churches move the crèche figures around the church as a way of telling children the story of Joseph and Mary and the shepherds and the wise men moving toward the cave in Bethlehem. It helps familiarize them with the story and the major players in the drama.

Imagine if—on this second Sunday of the Advent season—we introduced a rather unfamiliar figure to the usual cast of characters. This one would be actually be *quite* a character, a hard-to-buy figure, but it might suffice to use a toy professional wrestler. The kids might not get it at first, but once they realize that this figure represents John the Baptizer, they might begin to learn something about this prophet the Church calls the “forerunner”.

More likely, *adults* will ask themselves, “John the Baptizer? What’s he doing here, invading this nice, sweet story?” And they would have a right to be a little confused, because this new figure, like today’s Gospel story, takes the listener 30 years past the familiar account of the manger scene. Nevertheless, every year, no matter which lectionary cycle, on both the second and third Sundays of Advent we get John the Baptizer, despite his decided *lack* of sweetness and nicety.

We get John because his message is a central theme of Advent. It tells of the coming of Jesus—his coming, not as a baby in Bethlehem, but as the man he was born to become—the Christ, the anointed one of God who is savior of the world.

This John *does* invade our simple manger scene—just as his message invades our happy and pleasant lives. In the days immediately before Jesus began his ministry, God sent John, this ungainly prophet, to prepare the way for his coming. In today’s Gospel, we hear the evangelist asserting simply that “in those days, John the Baptizer *appeared* in the wilderness of Judea.” Like a street-corner preacher, he shows up unexpectedly at the River Jordan—no permit from the authorities, no license from the bishop, no diploma from any school—just a call from God and a passion to speak God’s truth. This literally wild and woolly outsider goes out and, in his zeal, *invades* the traditions of the religious people of his day.

John burst onto the scene to speak of *another* invasion to come—an invasion that would be mighty and lasting. He said that God was sending the most powerful leader ever to defeat all the powers the earth could muster.

This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing. Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.

"This invasion is underway. Jesus is coming."
That was John's message to his original audience,
gathered on the banks of the Jordan,
and it is his message to us still.

"Jesus is coming, and you had better get ready for what he brings
and what he reveals about God and about us."

John first invades the spirits of his hearers with a word of judgment—
his way of making us prepare for the coming Christ.
To the religious authorities of his day John said,
"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor.'
Even 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."

Likewise, and here is his pertinence to Advent,
John calls *us* to self-examination and confession—
*demand*s that we look in the mirror at the reality of our lives,
at everything about our behavior:
our choices about how we live, the false idols we erect
to give us the impression of safety—
everything that separates us from God and God's way of life.

Can we let John invade our thoughts
by hearing him call us to look deeply at what we are without God—
and to look at what part we may have to play in contributing,
by action or inaction, to a broken world?
Can we let John invade our serenity by examining the role played—
globally and locally—
by injustice, inequality, prejudice, ignorance, poverty, hunger,
illiteracy, powerlessness, and hopelessness?
Can we let John invade our indifference
by asking what part *we* play in these dis-eases,
around the world and in our own neighborhoods?

If we can work through the discomfort
of examining how much *we* are like a brood of vipers,
how much we have born bad fruit,
we can move on to an equally creative invasion.
Because John invades the spirits of his hearers with a second word: a word of hope.
The judgment is only the first message, not the last.
The ultimate reason for self-examination and confession is so that we can repent.
That means to turn ourselves around and face God-ward.
It means changing for the better.
And if we are serious about changing,
it means that we can begin to build a new day, with God's help.
We can build with a firm resolve to choose *God's* way, rather than our own.

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Each of us is called to listen to this rough prophet,
this John the Baptizer, who invades our pleasant Advent story
with his double message of warning and of hope.
We listen to him in this season by preparing the way for the Lord.
Preparing the way so that God may renew us and change us
into people who act and live by following the divine commands
and loving and caring for all of God's creation and God's children.

Knowing that we too are vulnerable and remembering that we are mortal
can, if we let it, lead us to find a greater reliance on, and faith in, God,
in new and deeper ways;
and our spiritual views and religious perspectives can transform us.
Recognizing our complicity—
the evil done on our behalf, as one of our prayers of confession puts it,
as well as the evil we have done and the good we have left undone—
such an awareness can propel us into helping in the healing of a broken world.

John invades our manger scenes,
making clear the power and meaning of what may have become a too familiar story.
John invades our lives to make sure we know that this Jesus,
who is to be born into our lives, is coming to set us free
from the materialistic and self-centered values of the world.
John invades our hearts to make sure we know
that Jesus is coming to enlighten our darkness,
so that we may become more fully his brothers and sisters and follow in his way.
May we have ears to hear his message, in Advent and every season.

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