

Second Sunday of Advent

*In the Name of our loving, liberating and life giving God:
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Good Morning.

John the Baptist takes center stage today and is, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord."'

In my mind's eye, I had always imagined John the Baptist as a wild and woolly man, clothed in dusty and dirty camel hair with a beard matted and sticky, littered with bits of the legs and wing that had fallen from his hand as he dined on grasshoppers and honey in the wilderness. That was until I saw Caravaggio's, *John in the Wilderness*, at the Nelson-Atkins Art Museum in Kansas City. If you haven't been there, seeing this work alone is worth the trip.

There are none of the usual identifying markers for a saintly person in this painting. There is no halo, for example, or sheep as in Caravaggio's earlier painting of John. We know it is the Baptist because of the camel hair tunic covering his lap and over his right shoulder. There is a reed staff in the form of a cross in the right hand, a reference to Matthew 11:7; and Jesus's reference to John as 'a reed shaken by the wind'; and he is surrounded by a red cloth symbolizing his martyrdom.

This John the Baptist is a young man sitting in the wilderness. He's looking down. He appears distracted, brooding, perhaps melancholy, maybe even afraid; contemplating, no doubt the weight of his mission and the gravity of his calling and all that people expect of him. Or, could it be he is thinking about Jesus and how to serve him and prepare for him?

This image paired with today's Canticle, *The Song of Zechariah*, changed everything for me. The Canticle is just the song; we miss out on Luke's setting of the scene. You remember the story of John's parents Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were righteous and old; and she thought to be barren. One day Zechariah goes to the temple to serve as priest, is chosen by Lot to offer incense, an angel appears and tells him Elizabeth is going to have a son; and he must name him John. He questions this, just a little, and is struck dumb. Nine months later, Elizabeth gives birth; they name him John, and Zechariah's speech is healed. He is filled with the Holy Spirit, and this is the song that comes forth from his mouth...Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; he has come to his people to set them free....

Zechariah doesn't begin by thinking of himself or even of Elizabeth; he made that mistake before. He doesn't think first of self, family, neighborhood or village. No, he begins by praising God for what God has done for all God's people.

And, then, I thought of something I read recently in Verna Dozier's book, *The Episcopal Theologian and Laywomen. The Dream of God: A Call to Return*, she wrote, "I believe the Christian church has distorted the call, narrowed it from a call to transform the world to a call to save the souls of individuals who hear and heed a specific message, narrowed it from a present possibility to a future fulfillment".

That is what I am afraid I had done to the person and preaching of John the Baptist. I have always understood his preaching as a call to save our souls; and after hearing the readings in the weeks leading up to this Sunday, I had assumed it had something to do with a future final

judgement. But that is not what Zechariah is singing about. This will become clear in the next few weeks as we continue with the rest of this chapter. The thing we need to remember for now is that salvation is not our own work. We cannot save ourselves and we sure can't save anyone else. But God can. That's what Zechariah is singing about. That's why he's dancing.

I had it all wrong. John was a little less TV evangelist and a little more Dr. King. He was scolding the people not so much for what they have done but, as we say in the prayer book, for what they had left undone. He was calling to repent not for who they are but for failing to be all they were created to be.

People didn't flock to John and go out to see a burly, scary, wild man who could put the fear of God in them. This isn't about saving our souls. It's not about our personal salvation. It's not about shaping up and flying right and staying away from those who don't.

It's about the love of God and the fact that God's love is not anything we can achieve or possess or enjoy on our own. God's love is experienced always and only in relationship. Where two or three are gathered together in His name, Christ said he will be in the midst of them. And even though God is revealed to us as a Trinity of persons; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, let's not fool ourselves. We and God are not four. And ourselves, we are not two. Christ may show up if he wants, when we are praying alone; and I believe many times he does but only because he wants to and not because of us. Or rather, only because he loves us, in spite of us, most general.

People flocked to the Baptist because he made known the promise of God his father had foretold:

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.

Paul expresses the same idea to the people of Philippi when he says, "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." He says, The one who began a good work among you, not in you! Then he said, "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

Caravaggio's young man, John, is sitting waiting in the wilderness. Praying, hoping, wondering, will the crowds ever come? Can he make Jesus known? Can he lead them to Him? Can he prepare the way? Can we?

Today, we sit with John and make Paul's prayer our own, asking that the love of God may overflow more and more in us, giving us the knowledge and full insight we need to help us to determine what is best... not just for ourselves, but all.

Let's pray this day for the grace to follow Christ, put others first, and to trust that as we strive to make this world a better place for all, the Holy Spirit will, undoubtedly, make it a better place for us. In the name of the Father...