

Well, he's back... John the Baptist, that is. We had hints of his arrival last Sunday in the gospel reading. This morning we get John in full voice and going full throttle. Of course, we have come to expect this. John is our uniquely Christian prophet. He is our Advent herald. We hear his words each and every year, and they have shaped our understanding of this season over the millennia.

John's are words of a particular preparation. John is presented as the voice of one commanding us: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." Now in other years, when we hear from the gospels of Matthew and Mark, we don't get many details about what this preparation might look like. We just hear, "brood of vipers," and "fleeing from the wrath of God." We are told to repent, that there is an axe a-swingin', and there's chaff a-burnin'. This message seems a bit out of place on this third Sunday of Advent, when we light the pink candle on the Advent wreath; today is "rose Sunday," when we are reminded that Advent is not Lent, that in our preparation there is joy. With all this talk of axes and chaff where is our joy? Is our joy that John is done after today? In other year's we hear John's words of "tough-love," and we may feel a little glad at his departure, but also a little confused, and a little guilty. "Prepare ye the way of the Lord..." But how?

Luke's rendering of John the Baptist includes material we don't find in Matthew or Mark. There is more here that may prove to be very helpful to us in our preparation. In Luke's gospel John has conversation with several who have come to him. He is not just preaching hellfire and brimstone (although there is plenty of that). John is in dialogue; he is in relationship.

After John's words of warning the crowd asks him, "What should we do?" Here is that question of preparation, "How?" John tells the people, "Share. Give. If you have more than enough give to those who have less than enough." If your hands are full, empty them. You're getting ready to receive. Make room. Empty yourselves.

We might well ask, "Well, what does emptying look like?" John tells us, in the form of his response to three particular situations. First, tax collectors ask him, "What should we do?" Now the tax collector was considered to be the lowest of the low in Jewish culture. The tax collector was a Jew working for the enemy. The tax collector was the employee of Rome, gathering money from the oppressed people of Israel and giving that money to their oppressors. To make matters worse tax collectors typically demanded more than the tax itself, pocketing the surplus for themselves. They had the might of Rome behind them; they could and did force their Jewish brothers and sisters to give them whatever they asked. It is no wonder that they were hated for their greed satisfied through treachery. Now notice what John says to the tax collectors. John tells them to just collect the tax, nothing more. Next, when the Roman soldiers ask him the same question, "What should we do?" John gives them a similar answer. Again the Roman soldiers were notorious for using their power to gain whatever they wanted. They satisfied their needs and desires at the expense and suffering of others. John tells them to let go of extortion; be satisfied with their wages.

In both cases John is telling the tax collectors and the Roman soldiers the same thing: let go of power. To prepare the way of the Lord let go of power. It is interesting that John doesn't say to the tax collector, "Stop collecting taxes," or to the soldier, "Don't be a soldier." John does not tell them to stop being who they are; they are to stop using the power they possess to enlarge themselves at the deprivation of others. Let go of the power that destroys.

The third instance involves John directly. His message was having a powerful impact on the people around him. We hear that the Jewish people were beginning to think of John as the Messiah. What a great temptation for him. The people had been waiting for centuries for The

One to come, the anointed of God who would deliver them from their tyrannical oppressors and restore the children of Israel to their promised land. What a temptation for John to say, "Yes. I am the one." His influence was tremendous. He easily could have stepped into the role of the one for whom the people longed. But John did not do so. He said, "No, there is one even greater coming. It is not me, but him." John abdicated that role and all the benefits of that power by continuing to point to the one who was to follow. To do otherwise would be to deny the person and role that God had created John to be.

To the "What should we do?" of the people, the tax collectors, the soldiers, and himself John responds, "Shed power." Shed the power that stratifies. Shed the power that is destructive. In John's responses we are reminded of Jesus, who was the master of upending power differentials. One of the great Jesus mantras was and is, "The first will be last and the last will be first... The greatest among us is servant of all." Most if not all of us tend to use power to express ourselves in this world. This is not necessarily a bad thing; God has given us gifts and the capacity to exercise them. We have been endowed with the power to create, but we can redirect that power in ways that hurt others. My identity can quite easily be tied to a person, a thing, an occupation, that differentiates me from others, that makes me feel powerful in the world. Herein lies a large part of the problem for us human beings: we tend to use the very gifts God has given us to lift ourselves above the other to the detriment of that other. We must get ahead, and we use our power to push another behind us. Let me tell you about two schools. The first is my undergraduate alma mater (a school I truly love). And in all fairness what I am about to describe only occurred in the pre-medical slice of life there, and was certainly not unique to my alma mater. When I arrived in college I found myself in a highly competitive school surrounded by highly competitive people whose common gift was great intelligence. These were very bright people who wanted to use their intellect to set themselves apart, sometimes doing so in damaging ways. What made things worse was that I was in a field that was highly competitive as well. I found myself embroiled with people who called themselves "pre-med cut-throats;" they would sabotage your chemistry lab experiment; they would give you class notes with wrong information on them; they would hide library books so that nobody could find them, even when the person who did the hiding had no need for the book. All of this struck me as especially evil. Here we were, in a place devoted to learning, and we were using our power to block that pursuit by others because we wanted to be the most learned, the most brilliant. We strove very hard to make mountains of ourselves and valleys of our fellow students.

When I arrived at medical school I found a very different situation. I found myself in one of the very few med schools in the country that had no grades. No grades. We couldn't compete with one another. We were lost at first. What was a young cut throat to do? The measure of our worth, the measure of our identity, the measure of our greatness had been taken away from us. All we could do was learn. And before long we found that we could actually help one another. We shared our power, and in building up another discovered something else: who we each were outside of a grade. After the jarring dehumanizing process of pre-medical education we were given back our humanity. I found this to be the great gift to me from that school; for we were launched into a field where we had the power of knowledge, where the doctor-patient relationship was necessarily defined by a power differential of knowledge. We learned that the purpose of that special knowledge was to share it so that others might heal and be healed.

I know that my experience is not that different from others. We all have experiences where power is wielded (to our own benefit or detriment) with the sole purpose of building one up and tearing one down. When John exhorts us to bring mountains low and lift valleys up I believe we are to understand this process in terms of what he said to the tax collectors, the soldiers, himself. Shed power. Empower others, and in the process become more and more yourself. Empty your hands, because they are about to be filled. Empty yourself, ready yourself, to receive the one who came powerlessly into this world only to become the greatest force this world has ever known: Jesus Christ, wielder of love, wielder of peace, wielder of life.