

Getting Down to the Root

Menno Mennonite Church
Advent 2: December 4, 2022

Purpose: To invite us ourselves into the work of pruning that which separates us from faith.

Message: As we wait on the Lord, we are called to consider that which WE need to repent of as we participate in Christ's coming.

Scripture: Matthew 3:1-12 [I will read]; Isaiah 11:1-10 (Please read)

Synopsis: John the Baptist is an opposing character. Full of odd habits and dire warnings, we do our best to avoid him if at all possible. Yet, he has a hard job. He is declaring the coming of the Messiah, the person on whom Israel had waited for centuries. And he, like the messiah to come after him, asks that which is least welcome and least expected; he is calling into question the means and method of belonging to the community. No longer will tradition or ritual suffice, he says. Rather, true faith, and real hope belong to the state of the heart and work of the soul. In this way, God's emerging word comes to be. This is part of God's work of restoration.

Matthew 3:1-12

3 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,

²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’ ”

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan,
⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them,

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you,

God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

¹⁰Even 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.

¹¹“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

We all have soundtracks of this season. Whether it's the mellow tones of Bing Crosby wishing for a white Christmas, the carols of our youth, the high tinkle of ringing Salvation Army bells, or the endless recording of jingle bells played by an animatronic snowman every time it senses movement in its immediate area, the sounds and songs of the season are all but omnipresent. These songs, secular and sacred, have a uniform quality about them, declaring a season of good will and cheer for all, that all we have to do is sit back and enjoy the hopes and beauties of the most wonderful time of the year, preferably while running up a substantial credit card bill for the sake of the consumer economy (OK its not a catchy jingle, but somehow it seems to sneak in there all the same).

For me, this season is defined by the strains of the Handel's *Messiah*, and its telling of the story of the Christ through the whole cycle of the Christian year. Having sung the *Messiah* every year that time and space would allow me, and heard it for years before that as the defining feature of my home congregation's celebration of Christmas, I often find myself slipping into the strains of this masterwork when reading scripture, or just thinking about Christmas in general. What's more, it is my father's tenor who gave life to the solos for many years, singing comfort into being, something which I know will be with me for the whole of my life. From the voicing of the prophets with their predictions of the coming Christ to the call of the throngs declaring "worthy is the Lamb that was slain", the story and these tunes are what for me define the work and the atmosphere of Christmas. These for me are the songs of promise and hope, voicing the words at the heart of scripture with profound clarity and hope.

Which is why John crying in the wilderness comes as such a shock, and not in a good way. We are used to the words of prophecy and promise, and the contesting words of repent and turn don't always fit well within the playlist. It's the grand Scrouge "Bah, Humbug" as far as the scriptures go, when all we want is Tiny Tim wishing that God would bless us, every one along the way.' How do we go about reconciling the message of the shoot of stump of Jesse, the little child of Bethlehem as being the one wielding the ax of destruction, ready to condemn the unproductive trees to the unquenchable fire? These words of John are not even part of the birth narrative of Christ within Matthew—they come after the return of the holy family from their sojourn in Egypt and right before an adult Jesus initiates his ministry in baptism by this same prophet. So what then are these words that call all who would listen to repentance and condemnation doing in this season of new life and new beginnings?

Sometimes I think it is easy to think that this was a fairly mild mannered disagreement going on here. It suits our preferred playlist—if we MUST deal with John the Baptist with all his hair and eating of locusts, the least we can do is make his message palatable. But even that is a mistake. I don't think we can fully capture what was being said and why, exactly, it is so critically important to the confrontation that was being had here. Even the symbol that he is famous for—baptism—is saying something about Israel that, when you think about it is not pulling many punches. We think that this is basically the start of the practice, being started by this first Baptist in the Jordan. There isn't a whole lot said of it in the Old Testament, at least that it is called by that as we would know it. Yet the ritual washing to redress the conditions of the soul is written deeply within Judaism with whole procedures being populated throughout the Levitical law on how and when to wash to remain clean and responsible members of Jewish society. There is expectation around washing for meals, around menstruation, when coming into contact with the unclean—the list keeps going. But there is only one time where full on immersion was required and that was for those wishing to join the congregation from the outside in. It is the last step of going from a Gentile to a Jew—a long trip to be sure, but it was a critical last step. So this was understood as the needed step for the unrighteous to become righteous, the outsiders to become insiders.

With that context in mind, is there little wonder that John has gained the attention of the powers that be, especially when the whole of the countryside seemed to be going out and joining in? When he stands knee deep in the water and invites the pharisees to come on in and receive the baptism for the repentance of what has been he is telling them that they, the ones whose purpose it was to monitor and lead the community, are the outsiders in need of cleansing, that they are the unclean. Like Gentiles, they are invited into a new congregation and new identity well away from their old one. He was messing with their sense of law and propriety. Somehow “You brood of vipers” is the type of insult that carries across the centuries, no matter the context. I don't think we can get away from John's message that easily.

Because we need to hear a voice like this especially at Christmas. In the layers of tradition and convention, we need the spiritual wake up call that would remind us that all is not well and point out to us once and a while the revolutionary nature of the birth we celebrate. This is talking about the beginning of the restoration of all humanity and the inauguration of the very Kingdom of God that asks us to consider that which might be ready for pruning in our

world and our lives no matter the season. Part of what makes these admonitions so hard to hear is that we carry those things in our lives that do not bear good fruit, or worse, pull us down for the working of the kingdom. What's more, is we know that these things are not easily let go of. We reason that these words were not destined for us, that they were simply taken out of space and time and do not speak to us or our generation. Yet here they are, and here they sit, asking us to do the work of Christmas: of completing the transformation of the world alongside the transforming presence of God with us. It asks us to consider that these days invite us into the way of Christ with its revolutionary love every bit as much as they do remember a child meek and mild.

To do that, to get that, we need to leave our sense of the familiar behind. Attending Goshen College with its Study Service term, it was common knowledge that the semester following your time abroad was going to be among your most difficult. Because you have just spent the previous 3 months outside the comfort zone experiencing new things and all the rest, and now you are returned to the familiar rhythms of college life and it doesn't always make sense anymore. I know that was the case for me as I tried to integrate what I just come to know and experience with a life that as it was before. I have known some people to drop out entirely as the translation was just too hard. Having your world deconstructed is hard; putting it back together it harder still.

It is this bubbled sense of the self and entitlements to which we are given is what John is decrying here in the wilderness. He is declaring the kingdom of God coming as one in which simple religious personal identity will never do. To give his words a modern day and more personal spin, he might be saying today "Don't think that claiming identity with Menno Simmons and the deep ranks of descendants that you treasure make the slightest difference here. God is able to birth good Mennonites from these very stones, Anabaptists from the dust of the earth." John is reminding us of one of the deep truths that humans are so given to forget: it is not the team on which we play that makes us holy; it is the fact that God so loved us—you and me—once and for all that gives us the identity of God Children. It is not about us. It never has been and never will be. It is about God. As priest and theologian Henri Nouwen once wrote: "we are not loved by God because we are precious; we are precious because God loves us."

We can get so preoccupied with bearing the fruit that John points us to that we can confuse the fruit that we produce for the kingdom that it is to reflect. John was inaugurating a

new community in the muddy waters of the Jordan, inviting us all to lay down that which would keep us away from God, and pick up our one true identity as people of God's love. He is calling us from our bubbles that insulate and protect us from an active sense of the largeness of the kingdom of God and to declare our final and true identity: as children of the living God. That is an affirmation that cannot be inherited, cannot be acquired, cannot be passively claimed in the hopes that it rubs off. Rather, it asks of us, demands of us, requires of us a reaction in response to the promise of the coming kingdom. We are preparing the way of the kingdom, proclaiming the coming king, until he comes again.

We repent not to be worthy of the kingdom. We repent to open that space in ourselves to be part of the kingdom coming still. Underlying every manic word that comes out of the mouth of John is the vision of God's kingdom in the offing spoken by a God who loves us and longs for that dream of peace to become our lived reality, not just as individuals but as all humankind, all God's children, and all of God's beloved and beautiful creation.

The invitation of advent is to the identity of the fullness of the Kingdom of God. May we be moved into the waters of God's love to claim our fullest identity: that we are children of God, living in the kingdom of God, already here, and coming still. Repent. Turn. And be embraced by the God who loves beyond all measure, then, now and forever more. Amen.