

Sermon

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December 8, 2019

Advent 1

Ps 72:1-72, 18-19; Is 11:1-10; Matt 2:1-12

John the Baptist

The Light Breaks through with an Unexpected Message

May the words spoken, and the words received, be only in your service, great God of Love. Amen.

Two women, with one baby between them. Both claim to be the baby's mother. Both gave birth within days of each other in the same household. One child died. The grieving mother of the dead child takes the other mother's living child for herself, and places the dead child in the other mother's bed. When the mother with the only living child wakes up and sees the dead child, she recognizes that this was not her infant. But the mother who lost her child and makes the switch insists that the living child is hers. So they take their grievance before Solomon, a king known far and wide for his wisdom.

Since both women claim to be the mother of the living child, with no way to determine who is telling the truth, Solomon orders the child to be cut down the middle, with each mother given half. This is the only fair way to resolve this, he tells them.

"Wait!" the true mother cries out. "Let the other woman have him."

In the king's wisdom, he knew that the real mother would love her child so much that she would rather surrender the baby than see it harmed in a compromise that was not compromise at all, ending with another innocent child lost.

Our psalm this morning is an ode of guidance and support for King Solomon, known by the people as anointed by God. As such, Solomon had the responsibility to rule with God's justice and compassion. At least, that was their charge. None of them, even wise King Solomon, managed a reign without sin, but the psalmist lists God's expectations for the anointed: to judge with righteousness, to give preference to justice for the poor, to bring peace, to save the children of the needy, to be as rain that falls on the earth for the people's flourishing. This is how we recognize an anointed one.

These characteristics are what the people expected from the coming Messiah, the new anointed that the one the prophet Isaiah foretold. Isaiah told the people to expect an ideal king to save them from their Babylonian captivity. This Messiah would be wise and understanding, able to strategize their victory with might, eager to decide equity for the poor and meek, and able to strike down the unrighteousness with his very words. This king will be one that the people have not yet seen in their history, bringing a peace they have never known. There will no longer be predator and prey; the strong will not overpower the weak. Their peace will be only that which heaven knows.

By the time of the Roman Empire, by the time Mary and Joseph's visitations by the angel about the birth of Jesus, and by the time Caesar Augustus issues a decree that everyone should go to their hometown so the empire has an accurate census by which to levy their burdensome taxes, the people of Israel are still waiting. They have yet to know this Messiah who will bring them victory. Centuries have passed, so their longing is keen, but perhaps their hope has faded.

Nonetheless, they waited for this Messiah, the anointed one of God.

In these days, a prophet emerges from the wilderness, calling them to a ritual cleansing of baptism to prepare them for the long-awaited one. They naturally would have expected a word of power and victory. Instead, they heard John cry out “Repent!” It must have been a shrill word indeed. It was certainly unexpected. Weren’t they still—throughout their history since Babylon—the ones who had been wronged by colonizers? What could John mean?

John called all the people to the River Jordan for repentance. “Repent.” This is a tough word for us in our contemporary context. We’ve confined it to regret, shame, and guilt, and it’s a term often used in the contexts of our culture wars. You’ll find people holding signs with this word outside abortion clinics and alongside Pride Parades. However, this does the word a disservice. The Greek word is *metanoia*. It literally means a change of mind. The way it’s used in the New Testament is a decision to turn around, to face a new direction. Repentance is a turn away from that which gets in the way of true wisdom, God’s wisdom, such as is uplifted by the King Solomon story about the two mothers, where the interest of the vulnerable one is lifted up as righteous action. It is a change of direction from sin and greed and disconnection toward life in God. In the Common English Bible, the word “Repent” is translated as “Change your hearts and lives.”

Everyone—then and now—is fully capable of turning away from God. We reject the wisdom of God when it seems so foolish compared to the wisdom of human ideals. We can so easily be persuaded to get in the way of our own best interest, or the best interest of others. All of us are capable of seeking our own way when what is best for us is to acknowledge our interdependence, forsaking some of what I want for what the community needs. All of us are capable of taking more than our share or consuming in ways that are not sustainable for the creation. All of us are capable of handing our allegiance over to that which is not God, making idols of what we worship.

John had special contempt for the structures that hold us in sin, as witnessed by his harsh language for the religious and political leaders of the day. They represented the powers—for there were powers that held privilege within the Jewish community, even as all were exploited by Caesar—that took advantage of the poor and vulnerable. John’s harshest words for those who knew better, but turned from God anyway to pursue their own selfish ends. These leaders would have been most able to understand what total life in God looked like and was meant to be, the ones who were supposed to teach the people. The lesson they were instead commissioned to share with the people would be similar to what even a contemporary Jewish community would say about their relationship with God:

“Our encounter with God gives birth to a *shutafut* (partnership). Linked in sacred covenant, we joyfully embrace our privilege to make the world more holy and compassionate. Judaism summons us to a life of Torah and *mitzvot*, and a commitment to social justice. Through study, observance, prayer, and acts of loving-kindness, we act as God’s partners, embodying God’s passion and involvement on behalf of all life.”¹

All of us can fail to act as God’s partners. All of us need to be called back into a covenantal relationship with God (and therefore one another). And those who are enmeshed in sinful systems that defy covenantal relationships are responsible to partner with God to dismantle them. This is at the heart not only of Judaism, but the Word that we Christians proclaim as good news known to us in Jesus who was, as we know, a Jew. This is exactly the life that Jesus calls us into. Jesus embodied every aspect of the longed for, ideal king. With a noticeable exception:

¹ Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, pamphlet “Conservative Judaism: Covenant and Commitment,” published by The Rabbinical Assembly, 3080 Broadway, NY, NY

he had no military might that led to political victory. Jesus' might was the nonsensical power of the cross. It's no wonder that the forerunner of the Messiah was himself rather nonsensical—a man who lived an ascetic and seemingly eccentric life.

How were the people to be prepared to hear and follow Jesus, the one whose acts of lovingkindness for the world would lead to his execution? How were they to have faith in the living Christ whose life was bolder than death, if they were not first prepared for this unexpected message of repentance? Turn away from all that is not God, John said, because the realm of God is on my heels. You need to be able to recognize it when you see it, because it's not coming from the expected place. If you're facing the palace, you'll miss the miracle of the stable. And you will not want to miss this!

“Repent!” John cries out. In this midst of a season where we'd rather hear jingle bells than judgment, this really is good news. It's an invitation to turn from what opposes or sabotages shalom. It's an invitation to join in God's amazing project of peace for the world, a peace we've never before experienced. It's an invitation to allow the Prince of Peace, who comes to us as a little child, to lead us.

May we accept God's invitation. Amen.