

Sermon 2 Advent Year A  
 December 9, 2007  
 St. John's Episcopal Church  
 The Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde

### Life Beneath the Surface of a Good Front

*The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord...* Isaiah 11:1

*In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah wrote when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"... Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins..."* Matthew 3:1-12

At times we are irresistibly drawn to people who tell us the truth, and not just any truth, but the particular truth we have been avoiding or would most like to hide from view. Despite the discomfort these truth-tellers cause us, we are drawn to them precisely because of their ability to stand in that awkward, uncomfortable, embarrassing space—the gap between what we know is right and our capacity to live it, between the people we wish we were and the people that we are. That is place from where prophets speak, ensuring that the truth they see in us is not lost, no matter how willingly we allow ourselves to be distracted by surrounding noise. That's the thing about difficult truth: we don't hear it until we're ready to listen. My hunch is that we are attracted to the truth tellers we would otherwise ignore when we're getting ready to make a move, when our willingness to pay whatever price necessary to walk toward truth at last outweighs our desire to play our lives safe. Then we will go just about anywhere to find someone who can articulate and embody what we ourselves are striving for.

The preacher Barbabra Brown Taylor once observed that the only difference John the Baptist and the self-appointed prophets of our lives is that the latter tend to plant themselves right in our way. "They get into your face and dare you to ignore them," she

said, "whereas John planted himself in the middle of nowhere. He set up shop in the wilderness, and anyone who wanted to hear what he had to say had to go to a lot of trouble to get there."<sup>1</sup> But by the thousands people sought him out, to be convicted by his words and washed in the river of baptism, perhaps as a way of saying, "Okay, I'm ready. I don't want to live a lie any longer."

John had an uncanny ability to see through people, and as you heard, he spares no words in his condemnation of the countless ways we hide behind appearances. He is clear that strength of character and personal integrity must go bone deep. We can't pretend these things. But the kind of soul work required to actually live our faith and values is hard, and truth be told, it takes a long time for us to let go of the illusion that putting up a good front is all that's really necessary.

One of my favorite essays by the author Anna Quindlin is entitled, "Putting Up A Good Front." It begins with Quindlin taking mental stock of her appearance as she sits at lunch with a colleague. She notes to herself with some satisfaction that her suit is well tailored, not flashy, but of quality. Her jewelry is tasteful. Everything looks good, right down to her nice brown boots. "They are not exactly right with the clothes," she concedes, "nowhere near as nice as my brown shoes would have been. But I'm wearing the boots because I am wearing my husband's socks." If you can picture in your mind her frenzy of looking for stockings that aren't there, grabbing her husband's socks, and racing out the door to make to her appointment on time, then you know something about putting up a good front as a way of life.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "Where Ever the Way May Lead," by Barbara Brown Taylor, in *Home By Another Way*. (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1993) p.13

Other telltale signs of this life, according to Quindlin: Your furniture is upholstered in the most fashionable colors: “Beneath the cushions, however, are two felt-tip pens without tops, seventeen raisins, about fifty cents worth of loose change, and the check you were supposed to mail to the insurance company four months ago.” Your car is nice. “However, the maps in the glove compartment are all folded the wrong way, the registration is in the pocket of your coat in the upstairs closet, and there is rarely sufficient gas. If you live in New York, the maps will generally be of New Mexico, Alabama and downtown Houston. If you live in Seattle, the maps will be of Maine and the Florida panhandle.”<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, many of the ways we put up fronts for each other are rather harmless and probably useful. We really don’t need to know what’s growing inside each other’s refrigerators and lurking behind closet doors. But there are some spiritual risks here, whenever we over-identify with our presentable sides and work excessively on them, at the expense of tending to our inner nature and the messiness we find there. When we mistake our looking good on the outside with being good on the inside, we’re headed for trouble. It’s especially dangerous with spiritual practice, whenever we imagine that going through the motions is an adequate substitute for an authentic life of faith. It’s also a death-knell to community. It’s hard to build authentic relationships when we’re busy looking good.

I’ll never forget when I first arrived as a student at Virginia Theological Seminary. I didn’t know a soul, and neither did anyone else in my class. The first few days were excruciating. We were all trying so hard to be Christians on display, worthy of

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<sup>2</sup> Ann Quindlin, “Putting Up a Good Front,” in *Living Out Loud*. (New York: Fawcett Columbine Press, 1988, pp.54-57.

the vocations we had signed up for. We exhausted ourselves in those first encounters to look like we belonged there, when in fact we all secretly feared that if the faculty knew the truth, they would very politely ask us to leave. I have never felt so lonely.

Fortunately, we couldn't keep the pretence up for long, and we soon become real with one another.

John, as you heard, was not impressed with those who came to be baptized because it had become the thing to do. He could tell that some, particularly among the spiritually successful, were trying to convince others and perhaps themselves that this outward act of repentance reflected their inner intentions. But John saw through them. "Bear fruit worthy of repentance," he told them. "Don't imagine that you can fake your way into abundant life. You need to prepare for the One who is coming by smoothing the rough terrain of your soul." We can't smooth that inner terrain if we lose sight of it in our preoccupation with how we appear.

The social critic, David Brooks, who spends of his time these days pontificating on the pages of our newspapers, about eight years ago wrote a funny yet devastating book on the American upper middle class, and all those who aspire, or pretend, to belong to its world, so ruthlessly defined by appearances. In a particularly revealing chapter on spirituality, he describes our tendencies to search for spiritual transcendence in places like Montana, giving rise to entire industries of spiritual consumption built upon, as he puts it, "the *idea* of Montana while rarely touching down in the actual state." At a typical Montana guest range, for example, if you took a horse out for a ride in the 1980s, you would have received a ten minute instruction on how not to get killed while horse back riding. "Now," Brooks observes, "at that same ranch they sit you down for a seventy

minute lecture on the spiritual life of horses, the techniques of horse whispering, and the Zen possibilities that await you on the trail.” Real Montana is nothing like that, as those who stick around long enough to endure low-wage jobs, frigid winters, and the loneliness of the place can attest, after all the spiritual consumers have gone home.

It isn't just in nature where we're tempted to go through the motions of spiritual life. We dabble just about everywhere. Even organized religion now carries with it a certain spiritual prestige. “We tend to feel a little surge of moral satisfaction,” Brooks writes, “if we can drop our church or synagogue attendance into a dinner party conversation. It shows that we aren't just self-absorbed narcissists but members of a moral community.” And yet, he points out, we don't really want to be tied down to a particular religious belief or the rigorous expectations of community. It's the *idea* of being religious that appeals to us, more than the religion itself. We want to keep our options open, always free to pick and choose what suits us, which as anyone who actually knows something about these things will tell us, is the antithesis of the spiritual life. Brooks writes, “When we try to have endless choices, we end up with semi-commitments and semi-freedoms. Some days I look around and realize what we've done with our forays into spirituality is, in fact, make ourselves more superficial, by ignoring the deeper thoughts and highest ideals that would torture us if we actually stopped to measure ourselves according to them.”<sup>3</sup>

John the Baptist would agree. Not one to mince words, he would painfully specific in his assessment of our willingness to settle for the appearance of what we value rather than the thing itself. He knew, as Dostoyevsky once wrote, that the secret of our being is not only to live, but to have something to live for, something worthy of our

greatest effort and sacrifices. John would ask us to look our disparities and contradictions and to *repent* of them, which is to say, to turn around and live a different kind of life. It's not easy.

Yet there is relief in turning around. It's a relief to lay down the burden of superficialities, allow ourselves to be known for who we are, and acknowledge all the ways that our lives are, in fact, rather messy. There is relief when the bubble bursts and our surface lives are ripped away from us, as scary as it is. For then we can speak from the heart. Then we hear, at last, what our hearts need to hear. This is how community is born: when we dare to be vulnerable with one another. If there's any reason to belong to Christian community, it's for that experience of letting go and being real, with all our contradictions and imperfections, and finding the grace that comes with telling the truth.

A life of faith begins with confession, acknowledging while lies beneath our well-presented surface. But the reason that God asks us to confess, to face the murkiness beneath our good fronts isn't so that we can *eliminate* our contradictions and reconcile disparities, as John seemed to think we could. It is, rather, so that we can prepare a place within ourselves for Christ to come. There's not much room for Christ, if you've noticed on the surface of our lives—we are much too busy and self sufficient for him there. Rather he seeks a home within us in the quiet of the night, in the loneliness of our being, and the complexity of our motivations. He seeks a home not where we know we are right and good and strong, but where we are guarded and vulnerable. It's there that Christ will come.

“There is one coming after me, who is mightier than I,” John proclaimed. “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” He was right on both counts. Jesus

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<sup>3</sup> David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008) pp.223-47.

comes with power and fire, but not the kind John expected. Jesus' power lies in his acceptance and forgiveness. His fire isn't one that burns us, but is rather the kind we stare into on a winter night, one that allows us to ponder the important questions—not about the shoes we're wearing or car we're driving, but rather the life we are living and why, the burdens we carry that no one else sees unless we tell them, and our tender hopes for a better day.

At the back of the church you will find a suggested spiritual practice for this week. It is simply this:

Each day sit in a room lit with only one candle. Remain attentively silent for one or two minutes, allowing the light to touch your soul. Pay attention to all that rises to the surface and offer your concerns to God. Close with a word of thanks. Brevity is fine. The daily repetition will give depth and meaning to this practice.

There is, as well, a suggested prayer:

Merciful God, your light shines in our darkness. Help us to trust that in you we don't have to pretend to be anything we are not, that Christ's coming is to help us become all that you want us to be. Grant us the grace to be fully human, and, if it be your will, turn the contradictions and struggles within us into sacred space where we can welcome you and one another. Amen.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Prayer adapted from *Advent Readings from Iona*, Wild Good Publications, 2000. Reflection adapted from *Advent and Christmas: Wisdom for G.K. Chesterton*. Liguori Publications, 2007.