

St. Thomas, Freeman, VA  
December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent (RCL A)  
A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Matthew 3:1-12

Though John may appear to be almost a cartoon figure, dressed in camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey, his message is hardhitting: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." With his dress of a camel's hair smock and a diet of eating locusts, honey, or whatever he can find, for sure he stands out in a crowd. To the righteous Jewish religious leaders of his day, John was the exact opposite of what they thought of as a messenger of God.

In more than just a few ways the message of John the Baptist is totally counter cultural – both then and now. John is telling his hearers in clear, plain, and shocking language to get their lives right with the God who created them sustains them.

John, with his strange dress and odd diet was a man who could never identify with the righteous people of his era. Instead he identified with the poor and outcast. Because of this you can guarantee that the poor and outcast flocked to him. Those who are downtrodden and have no advocate will always be able to identify an honest advocate when they see one.

On the other side of the equation were Jewish religious leaders whom John called out as the "...brood of vipers..."<sup>1</sup> The images are strong: vipers slithering ahead of a rapidly spreading fire. Snakes were, of course, unclean animals, so John is adding insult to injury. Yet, we shouldn't get the wrong impression. The Jewish religious leaders against whom John spoke were not bad people. Rather, they were absolutely dedicated to the maintenance of what they believed to be the proper ways to be a follower of God. The problem was that they had domesticated their faith. It was a faith that was all too comfortable. History shows us that every five to seven hundred years God sends someone or many someones to us to radically challenge our beliefs and faith commitments. John was one of those sent by god to challenge the faith commitment of the people. John's challenge to them was to completely reform their way of believing in God.

John's words remind me of something I learned from a friend a some years ago. My friend told me that the first of the Ten Commandments, "Thou shall have no other gods before me," should have added to it the phrase, "including your best definition of me." In other words, we can't absolutely define God. Even more, when we think we've got God all figured out, then that's a sure sign that we are wrong.

The people whom John was addressing thought they knew who God was, yet they had constructed for themselves a god of their own liking; a god who conformed to their

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3:7b, NSRV.

desires and their ways; a god who, amazingly, liked all the things they liked. The people John addressed had an all too comfortable relationship with God. Is this your god?

The God about whom John talked, the God to which John wanted to introduce to his hearers, is a God who demanded that the people of society repent. Hmm, repent? Isn't that something you hear from a crazed man with a beard and a sign who's yelling that "the end is near" as you pass by him on the street corner? Do modern people need to repent or even say "I'm sorry" for something they did? My guess is that John had plenty of people coming to him and confessing about how they cheated on their taxes or beat their donkey. What's do you think of when you think of repentance and confession? Murder? Adultery? Child abuse? Stealing? Of course all those things will fall within the category of repentance and confession. However, that is only the start. John invites us to go deeper.

When we have confession in our faith tradition, the prayer book calls for us to observe a period of silence. That silence is an opportunity for us to reflect upon the thoughts, words and deeds in our lives that need to be confessed. In my experience not only is that period of silence for many of us the most awkward time of the morning, perhaps the most awkward period of the entire week. Why?

The world in which I live doesn't give much value to silence and waiting. Rather, in our world all too much of life is based upon immediate gratification. Using my smart phone I can go to Amazon.com and order just about anything and have it on my doorstep within 24 to 48 hours. That's quite a bit different from the times of old when we used to go to the Sears and Roebuck catalogue, mail in an order form and, if we are lucky, we'd get the item in three or four weeks. Using that same smart phone I can send a text or email to someone on the other side of the world that will be received immediately. Just yesterday I sent an email to someone in Jerusalem, seven time zones away in another quadrant of this planet, and got a response in twenty minutes. Do you remember the time when we used to write letters to someone overseas that might take up to a month to arrive in another country, and take two months to get a reply?

As a consequence we are not always very good at being patient and waiting for things or for people. We want to have what we want now – and not later; today and not next week. In our Gospel lesson John the Baptist is in saying to his people that they need to wait; wait for the one who is coming after him; that John is not the savior or the messiah. I can guarantee that John's followers didn't like that any more than we would like being put in the position of waiting.

While John tells his hearers he will baptize and clean them with water, Jesus will baptize them with fire. But this fire, the fire of Jesus, about which John spoke was a very hot fire. It was so incredibly hot that it would purify them completely.

In my early days when I had just gotten out of the Navy for the first time I worked at a General Electric factory that made a variety of the large outdoor street lights you see atop all the poles in our neighborhoods and cities. Those lamps were made of

aluminum that had to be heated to over 1,500 degrees Fahrenheit so that it could turn into a liquid and fill the molds that formed the street light parts. Once right after I went to work in the factory, which I remember wondering if the heat there was anything like in hades, I looked at the scrap aluminum that was being melted down. I couldn't help but notice that there was at times some outright trash in the scrap piles: paper, plastic and other inferior metals. I asked one of my fellow workers if the trash wouldn't harm the aluminum. He told me, "Oh no. The heat of the molten aluminum will purify and eliminate all the foreign materials. All the trash will burn up and leave only pure aluminum."

The fire with which Jesus baptizes will be the purifying agent in the lives of those who come to him for the spiritual cleansing only he can bring about in our lives.

Next February I will lead our next diocesan pilgrimage to the Holy Land. A few days into the pilgrimage we will go to the place on the Jordan River where we believe that John was baptizing people. While we are there we will renew our baptismal vows. Our vows will be renewed in much the same way as they are going to be renewed here at St. Thomas today. Today as we gather around the Baptismal font to renew our vows of Baptism and confess Jesus as the Lord of our lives, that same purifying fire will be here with us. Never forget the symbolism that when you and I went down into the water of baptism that we died to the old life where God may have been a comfortable and manipulatable god. When we arose from the water we embraced the God of newness who challenges us to live a life fitting with being repentant of our sins; a new life of following Jesus.

Now I invite you to a time of silence as you contemplate who you are, what you have to lay at the foot of the cross of Jesus, and what God is bidding you to become.