

Christ Church Parish in Tacoma
Advent Quiet Morning | December 5, 2020
 Fr. Samuel Torvend

Almighty God,
 by whose providence your servant John the Baptist was wonderfully born,
 and sent to prepare the way of your Son our Savior by preaching repentance:
 Make us so to follow his teaching and holy life,
 that we may truly repent according to his preaching;
 and, following his example, constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice,
 and patiently suffer for the truth; through Jesus Christ, your Son our Lord,
 who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
 one God, forever and ever. Amen.

First Reflection

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. [Mark 1:4-6]

For those who lived in ancient Palestine at the time of Jesus and John, the wilderness was a place fraught with danger. It was bitter cold in the winter and boiling hot in the summer. It appeared to be devoid of anything that sustained life. It was a region inhabited by wild animals who were tempted to prey on settled communities. And it was this, too: a region capable of harboring robbers, marauders, and fugitives from the law – the dangerous characters townspeople feared as if they were wild animals.

At the same time, the wilderness symbolized a departure from the social order of settled communities where conformity to the time-honored social behaviors of the village, town, or city was expected, even demanded. To live in the wilderness marked one as an odd-ball, perhaps someone who suffered with delusions, a man or woman who found it impossible to fit in to the predictability of working from sunrise to sunset and living hand to mouth with no guarantee of ample food or drink in the days and weeks ahead. To live in the wilderness was to live among wild animals. It was a place that symbolized the chaotic, the diabolical forces in life: *diabolical*, from *diabolous*, that word which means throwing or tearing things apart, fragmenting life and one's consciousness.

The biblical readings for Advent invite Christians to enter the inhospitable wilderness and there encounter the larger-than-life figure of John the baptizer. And yet I wonder if the tables are turned this year; I wonder if the tables are turned and, in this largely ill-tempered year, the wilderness has come to us. After all we live in a chaotic time, do we not? Infection is surging; the number of unemployed is growing; the rate of food insecurity increases; we need to be separated from loved ones and friends in order to protect them and us; and at the moment there is no assistance from officials in the

highest levels of national government. Yes, I would say we know well of chaotic and diabolical forces in life; I would say we know well the wild animals we call “virus” and “selfishness that refuses restriction” and “isolation.”

And in the midst of our wilderness, this chaotic time, there is John standing among us: John the oddball, John the non-conformist, John who wears animal skins and eats locust and wild honey. And so I ask: What does John – just as he is and before he ever speaks – what does John communicate to us? There are, I say, hints for us in what he wears and eats. Mark writes that he was clothed in camel hair with a belt cinched around his waist. Of course, camel hair is an animal skin. And in hearing of animal skins, we are reminded of their first mention in our holy book: “The Lord God made garments of skins for *Adam and Eve*, and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21) as they left the garden paradise. And there is this, too: the memory of the prophet Elijah who wore a cloak with a belt cinched around his waist (2 Kings 1:1-18; 2:13-14). With Adam and Eve, we hear the yearning for Paradise to be restored, for the diabolical powers of this world to weaken and slither away. With Elijah, we hear of the prophet who will prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah, for the advent of the One whose life and work will begin the process of actually restoring Paradise on earth, who will begin the process of transforming harsh wilderness into an evergreen garden: a garden large enough to welcome all creatures, human and other than human; a garden through which flows clean and abundant water, water that will yield an abundance of food sufficient to feed all people; a garden in which all will be sheltered and no one homeless; a garden whose healing properties of plants will be available to all people.

Mark notes that the seemingly peculiar diet of John consisted of locusts and wild honey. But, then, maybe his diet was not so peculiar after all when we consider that John ate nothing made with human hands, products that ran the risk of being fouled or tainted. Rather he ate only that which flowed directly from the hand of a benevolent Creator. And maybe, then, we can begin to see that John ate “pure” food in a time when the political and religious leadership of his land was manifestly impure, and stained by an aggressive competition for power and privilege while the vast majority of people assumed their poverty was ordained by an aloof and uncaring God. Perhaps we can see that John’s choice of food was itself a tangible expression of his commitment to a new social order in which God’s justice and God’s mercy would order and suffuse life on earth. Here, then, John’s diet of locust and honey is not so much the quirkiness of a wilderness oddball but rather expresses a yearning for *purity* in the midst of the corrupting influence of uncaring religion and a politics that served only the privileged.

Here, then, before he ever speaks, John expresses in clothing and diet the yearning for a down-to-earth washing away of anything that diminishes or degrades the creatures of God. Well, we know this well, do we not? We know about wild forces that, we pray, can be washed away in this new year of grace that began on the First Sunday of Advent. We know something about chaotic impulses within us and around us that can dehydrate us like a boiling summer sun or chill us like a cold winter’s blast. And we know something, do we not, of the great yearning for God’s healing presence, God’s

cleansing and refreshing presence in our lives, our nation, and our world. No wonder the medieval nun and abbess, Hildegard of Bingen, would pray these words in the midst of her ill-tempered time: “Heaven hears our cry for healing. O life-blood of the Holy Three, O scarlet music: cleanse and anoint this wounded world and feed us with your pure, your life-giving word and food” [from the *Symphonia Armonie Celestium Revelationem*].

A poem by the monk, Thomas Merton

St. John, strong Baptist,
 Angel before the face of the Messiah
 Desert-dweller, knowing the solitudes that lie
 Beyond anxiety and doubt,
 Eagle whose flight is higher than our atmosphere
 Of hesitation and surmise:
 Never abandon us, your few but faithful children,
 For we remember your amazing life,
 Where you laid down for us the form and pattern of
 Our love for Christ,
 Being so close to Him you were His twin.
 Oh buy us, by your intercession, in your mighty heaven,
 Not your great name, St. John, or ministry,
 But gain us your great command of graces,
 Making our poor hands fountains full of life and wonder
 Spending, in endless rivers, to the universe,
 Christ, in secret, and His Father, and His sanctifying Spirit.



Yaryna Movchan, “John the Baptist,” 21st century

Second Reflection

Mark writes, *John the baptizer appeared, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from countryside and city were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan.*

It is good for us to remember that, at the time of John and Jesus, the River Jordan was not only a border between different political regions, but also a river that symbolized for the people of Israel the passing of their ancestors, the Hebrews, through the Red Sea, their exodus out of Egypt. Indeed, each year the Israelites would dam the River Jordan and, in imitation of their ancestors, walk through it dry-shod as if it were the Red Sea, singing psalms of freedom from slavery, psalms of thanksgiving to God, their liberator from oppression. Thus it makes sense that John comes to the Jordan and there invites the people to repent – to repent which means, *to turn in a new direction, to take a different path in life* and, in so doing, *to slough off attitudes and behaviors harmful to oneself and others, to be washed free of attitudes and behaviors rooted in the impulse for revenge*, for wounding others when one is wounded in body, mind, or spirit. John comes to the Jordan, the river that speaks of freedom from forces in society that oppress, demand conformity, and espouse divisive and degrading practices.

To be washed in this water – the water of new beginnings – was to be cleansed from the impurity of uncaring religion and a corrupt politics that served only the few, that paid no attention to the needs of the many. To be washed in this water was to be drawn into a free space with others who refused to seek revenge when harmed, with others who aspired to forgive and thus bring an end to violences small and large. No wonder the early 19th century Black spiritual recognized the relationship between John's baptism and the abandonment of violence: "I'm gonna lay down my burden, down by the riverside. I ain't gonna study war no more; I'm gonna lay down my burden, down by the riverside. I ain't gonna study war no more." Living in a culture in which harm done to oneself by others was frequently settled by vengeance, it would have been surprising to hear John invite people to be washed into a community committed to the difficult work of forgiveness: of letting go the impulse to lash out and strike back with even greater force. But, then, perhaps John knew that retribution was the common way, the accepted way, through which the government of his day – that is, the government of imperial Rome – dealt with anyone or any group that disagreed with its violent and merciless policies, with any form of criticism. Perhaps John knew that ancient philosophers and military leaders advised people to scorn the practice of mercy as something weak, effeminate, and insufficiently "manly."

I wonder: is it any different for us? Is the call to forgive, the call to be merciful, the strongest message we receive in our own culture? Is the call to work for peace on earth the dominant message of our government or the governments of the world? And if the answer to those questions is "No," or "Not most of the time," doesn't it then become clear that our being washed in the waters of forgiveness and mercy and peace, marks us with a purpose, a challenging purpose? It is of interest to me that in Mark's gospel the disciples of Jesus frequently misunderstand Jesus' purpose: they are not the brightest group of followers; they find it difficult to grasp and then live into the

embodied teaching of Jesus, his actions frequently more powerful than his words. They demand of Jesus places of privilege and power for themselves and frequently demonstrate little care for those most in need around them. They have been so thoroughly formed by their culture to seek power over others that they miss the humility, the earthiness of John who says, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals” (Mark 1:7). Rather than viewing oneself as lesser than others or pretending to be docile or feigning a submissive tone, the biblical understanding of humility springs from its root *humus*, that is, the soil of the earth. To be humble is to see one’s feet planted firmly on the earth with and among all other creatures: it is the recognition of one’s equality with other creatures, human and other-than-human. It is the wellspring of democracy. To be humble, in the biblical sense, is to be down-to-earth, not puffed up with arrogance or a sense of superiority over others. It is, in the case of John, to recognize that one is a creature, not the Creator: “There is one more powerful than I who is coming after me.” Perhaps this is why in his Rule, St. Benedict accounts for 12 steps on the road to humility in which one begins to live the fundamental equality inherent in the Christian life in which power over others begins to be sloughed off and cooperation with others in service to the common good begins to grow.

A poem by the priest, Malcolm Guite

Love’s hidden thread has drawn us to the font,
 A wide womb floating on the breath of God,
 Feathered with seraph wings, lit with the swift
 Lightening of praise, with thunder over-spread,
 And under-girded with an unheard song,
 Calling through water, fire, darkness, pain,
 Calling us to the life for which we long,
 Yearning to bring us to our birth again.
 Again the breath of God is on the waters
 In whose reflecting face our candles shine,
 Again he draws from death the sons and daughters
 For whom he bid the elements combine.
 As living stones around a font today,
 Rejoice with those who roll the stone away.
 [“A pair of Sonnets for St. John the Baptist,” June 23, 2017]



Donald Jackson “The Baptism of Jesus,” 21st c.

Third Reflection

John proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

The Bible holds two different understandings of the Spirit, the Spirit who is the wind or power of God present to and with God’s entire creation. One suggests that the Spirit is an abiding presence in the lives of those who welcome the Spirit in their lives. In this view, the Spirit is a constant presence, little different than the air we may take for granted as we breathe in and breathe out from minute to minute and hour to hour. Of course when taken to an extreme, the Spirit can easily be overlooked and forgotten and in forgetting of the Spirit, one might well think that one is alone in this world, without energy or purpose. The other view suggests that the Spirit is an animating presence, a rush of energy or a jolt to one’s consciousness, a powerful force that pushes one to act, little different than the adrenalin that surges through one’s body, enabling one to do or to say something that one might have thought difficult to do or to say. Of course when taken to an extreme, the felt need to be constantly active can simply exhaust body, mind, and soul, leaving one crumpled on the floor or bed.

We should not imagine that these two understandings – rooted in the actual experience of our ancestors in faith – are opposed to each other. Rather, it can be helpful to see them as complementary aspects present in each of the baptized: both abiding, steady presence and animating, activating energy. Of course if one prefers a more steady experience of Christian faith and life, one might be resistant to the animating and activating dimensions of the Spirit. And if one is fueled by the need for constant activity, one might be resistant to the Spirit’s prompting to stop, rest, and reflect on whether or not one’s activity holds any value or is aligned with the mission of Jesus.

“I have baptized you with water,” says John, “but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” Dear friends, we live on the other side of that announcement. We have been baptized with water and the Word of God and anointed with sacred chrism and the Spirit. We have experienced what John promised. How might Spirit be inviting you, nudging you, or even pushing you? Where might the Spirit be leading you as Advent leads us into this new year of grace?

One of the great challenges for Christians who enjoy and expect a well-ordered form of worship and appreciate the predictability of an equally well-ordered pattern of daily prayer is the temptation to imagine that the Spirit is contained within such forms and patterns and will not be experienced in any other way. The gifted writer, Annie Dillard, comments on such a temptation in this well known but timely manner:

“Why do [church] people seem like cheerful brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? *Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we*

so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? [It would seem that Christians] are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. || It is madness," she continues, "to wear straw and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return." For the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return. [Teaching a Stone To Talk, 1982]

A careful meditation on the biblical readings for Advent should lead us to recognize that the Spirit is not the domesticated bird seen on so many tacky church banners but rather a free, roaming, blowing wind that appears in the form of a mangy prophet named John from the wilderness, that overshadows an elderly Judean woman named Elizabeth and young Galilean girl named Mary with the promise of pregnancy and birth, that hovers over Jesus as John immerses him in the waters of the Jordan River and thus animates his public life and enables him to offer an alternate way of living in this world: an alternative to the violence, injustice, and corruption of uncaring religion and a politics that benefits only the few. "I have baptized you with water," says John, "but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." It is that same Spirit who hovers over us, dear friends, as we enter into this brief and beloved season of Advent: that season marked by such incredible yearning – a yearning I think all of us experience with perhaps greater urgency than ever before.

And so I ask again: How might the Spirit be inviting you, nudging you, or even pushing you? Where might the Spirit be leading you as Advent leads us all into this new year of grace?

A poem by the laywoman, Susan Palo Cherwien

Come, O Spirit, come to us,
Sending forth the luminous
Radiance of your holy light.

Come, O Parent of the Poor,
Come, O generous Treasure-store
Come, O heart-illuming Light.

O most gracious Comforter,
Sweet and welcome Visitor,
Sweet and soothing Healing Light.

In our labor, be our rest,
In our temper, temperance,
In our tears, consoling sigh.

O most blessed Light of God,
In our hearts make your abode,
Filling us with faith and sight.

Lest your will abide in us abide,
Nothing does in us reside,
Nothing that is whole and might.

Cleanse all that is soiled, impure,
Quench all that is dry and sere,
Cure all that is mortified.

Gentle what is stone in us,
Kindle what is ice in us,
Bridle what is lost and wild.

Grant this to your faithful host,
All who place in you their trust:
Sevenfold gifts in us ignite.

Grant the merit of the just,
Grant your sure deliverance,
Grant perpetual delight.



Renier de Huy, "The Baptism of Christ with Descent of the Spirit," 12th c.
Notre-Dame-aux-Fonts, Liège, Belgium

