

“SHOCK-JOCK, CUSTODIAN, AND PROPHET”

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-18

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The Rev. Ryan Lambert

Last week we entered into Advent with a service focused around the discipline of waiting. Throughout the rest of Advent our scripture lessons and services will have us focus on some of the key actors in the Advent narrative. This week we focus on John the Baptizer, next week Joseph, then Mary, and finally on Christmas Eve we will again meet the Christ child in Bethlehem.

This week’s lesson tells us that John the Baptizer was the son of Zechariah and that John’s call came to him through a wilderness encounter with God. It was that wilderness encounter that led him to a life as an itinerate preacher and teacher. John the Baptizer is one of the key actors in the drama that leads us to that Bethlehem barn, but we are often quick to pass by this complex and interesting character. As I spent time with John this week I found myself thinking of him in three distinct—yet interwoven—ways. John the Baptist is bombastic and loud, he is pastoral and caring, and he is a visionary—and thus I arrived at a view of John that is unlike any trinity ever composed before—John is a shock-jock, a custodian, and a prophet.

First, let me introduce you to John the Baptizer as “shock-jock. This may be a new term for some of you as this slang is used to describe a type of radio broadcaster who attracts attention with a style that a significant portion of the listening audience may find offensive. This is undoubtedly a strange term to assign to one who announces the coming of Jesus, but I believe it is more fitting than we might imagine at first glance. When I read our scripture lesson I imagine a modern-day John the Baptizer renamed Johnnie B, working a drive-time radio shift where he calls out whomever he doesn’t agree with. Johnnie B is one part Howard Stern, one part Randi Rhodes, and one part Robin Williams at his manic best. This Johnnie B has an edge to his personality and it is this edge that allows him to chastise the hypocrites of his day. The contemporary talk-radio version of Johnnie B is crass and frustrated, mixing anger and genuine passion as he refuses to allow his listeners off the hook for what he perceives as our collective failures. John the Baptist is at his Johnnie B best when his words echo through the countryside:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” Don’t you dare rely on the fact that Abraham is your ancestor! For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. An ax is lying at the root of the trees and every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

The shock-jock John the Baptizer would undoubtedly add an emphatic “So there!” to the end of his broadcast, and the sting of his rebuke would cause many a listener to change their radio to another place on the dial. But this is John the Baptizer as his most indignant, his most passionate, and his most shocking, but the sting of his words are no less painful today that they were years ago and this is a shock-jock that we cannot ignore.

As our lesson progresses I found myself understanding John the Baptizer in a different way, for when those same chastised followers ask John what they are to do to move beyond their “viper-ish” ways, we see a new side of this man. In this next section, running from verses 10-14, I find myself understanding John as a custodian. Now most often we think of a custodian in terms of janitorial services...cleaning floors, wiping down walls, keeping restrooms clean and well supplied. But a custodian is also one who is a caretaker, and it is a hybrid of these two definitions that I would assign to John. In this section of the text John is explaining to his followers how they can “clean up”—their lives and their society. “Share your coats and your food, stop collecting and pocketing those “extra” taxes, stop using your position as a threat against others,” he says. In short, John as custodian is promoting “clean living,” but rather than being just the one who cleans up the mess, he is offering advice for his followers so that they can do the work themselves. I picture John as the custodian who’s cart of cleaning supplies includes not only spray bottles and disinfectants, but also food, warm clothes, and words of compassion and care. In this passage John is both the one who does the nitty-gritty clean up work **and** the one who supplies the tools that allow people to build a better life with God.

Finally, as our lesson comes to a close there is the John the Baptizer as prophet. In this role he announces to all who would hear that although he baptizes with water there is someone much greater who is yet to come—one who will baptize and transform not simply with water, but with the spirit. The baptism that John offers is a baptism of preparation...one that prepares the hearts of his followers for the one who is yet to come. In baptism John invites his followers to take the first step in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. He makes it clear that more will be asked and more will be offered when the Messiah comes...for the baptizing prophet wants it known that his life and his ministry are not the completion of God’s plan, but just a part of the process.

In this gospel story of John the Baptist we have a face to face meeting with one of key actors of our faith story. It is with intention that I describe John the Baptist in this way for it is his action that I find him most compelling. Rather than being simply a voice who announces the coming of the Christ child, John the Baptizer is wholly engaged in preparing the way for the birth of that child—he chastises and cajoles, he demands that his followers to live lives that speak of justice and mercy, and he does all of this because he too is preparing for the coming of the Jesus.

As I wrestled with who John the Baptizer was as an actor in this epic story I found myself also wrestling with who I and we ought to be as actors in the continuing evolution of this epic. Where are we being called to join John the Baptist in his Johnnie B form as shock-jock and cultural critic—calling out the viper-ish tendencies of our hearts, our society, and even our church? Where are we being called to be the custodians and caretakers—to give loving care and compassionate answers to the body of Christ? Where are we being called to be a prophetic voice in a world that is filled with need, hurt, and division? Where are we being called to be actors during this Advent season?

Our encounter with John the Baptizer leaves no doubt that Advent is more than a season

for passive waiting. This is a season when we are called to engage the love of God and participate in the ministry of becoming; so that we are ready and the prep work has been done...so that the entire world can celebrate when we gather in Bethlehem!

Thanks be to God. Amen.