

POINTING THE OTHER DIRECTION
December 6, 2020...2nd Sunday of Advent
Eastminster Presbyterian Church

The story of John the Baptist is told in all four Gospels and they all agree about one thing; John is a strange man! And every year, at some point in the Advent season, this strange preacher, strange even by his own era's standards, makes his way into our lives. And the message he is preaching, is no more mainstream than his wardrobe or lifestyle. We get the basic information about him in Mark's gospel, but Matthew paints him as a fiery spitball calling the ones to whom he was preaching a "brood of vipers" and telling the Jewish leaders that being Jewish did not make them special. He preaches that all who have two coats need to give one to someone else, tells the soldiers to stop extorting money from others and learn to live on what they make. He even goes as far as to tell the tax collectors they need to be honest beyond reproach. All of this from one considered uncivilized, unclean and unacceptable. In summary, John's message is one of dramatic social and moral reform. And guess what, people were listening!

With that listening, John joins a long line of voices that preached changes that made the status quo uncomfortable. He followed in the footsteps of Amos, Hosea, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah. They may not have lived in the woods and eaten bugs, yet their words were every bit off-putting as John's. But eventually the people of Israel actually *did* give them an ear. As a result we read the sometimes uncomfortable-at times unwanted-and most often, the honest message of the prophets God sent. And we learn that listening to these strange messengers was one of Israel's greatest strengths. This ability to give attention to words we really do not want to hear from people with whom we normally would not agree invites us into a listening that is deep enough to find from common ground.

Let us face it, in our world today, we do not listen enough. We see it all the time in the media. Whether it is politics or religion or sports or any other ripe topic, more often than not, people encounter one another with their minds already set on their opinions, their views, their right against someone else's wrong. We refuse to listen seriously to anything we do not want to hear.

For many years I was part of a pastor cohort group, both men and women. Our lives have changed. Some have changed locations. Some have moved on to secular callings. Several have retired. But, at the time we were gathering, some were long-tenured pastors in their churches, others were newcomers to parish ministry, most of us were somewhere in between. Some had and have children, others grandchildren, one...no children at all, still. We studied at different seminaries...Austin, Princeton, Columbia, Louisville, San Francisco, McCormick. We gathered for a day and a half, most times at the family ranch of one of the pastors. We had table fellowship. Shared scripture. Caught up on our families. Prayed with and for one another. Most of us served the same kinds of congregations...smaller, mission-minded, financially insecure and decreasing in numbers. We had much in common. We had many differences. Our leadership

styles were varied, our personalities different and spiritual practices and habits all over the map. We were, in essence, mini versions of our congregations and our world.

And that, as you know, can lead to some interesting theological discussions about what it means to be faithful leaders and followers of the ministries we believe the Spirit is calling us and our churches, and Christ's church universal.

The kind of respect we have for one another and our ministries made us comfortable enough to be uncomfortable with each other. We were intentional about giving each other time to talk, and even more intentional about each of us doing deep listening. On matters of faith, church politics, outreach avenues and much more, we agreed and we disagreed. Our schedules allowed us so few times to meet, that when we could gather, leaving that place where honesty and truthfulness were accepted and even celebrated, made it hard to end our time together.

Most times we were on the same page with each other, but not always. We challenged, in an encouraging way, one another. We held each other accountable for the words, hopes and the spiritual disciplines we shared. We stayed together because we needed to hear and ponder and pray about things for which we did not necessarily agree, but wanted to respect the views and learn from one another.

We lived in community with the love of Christ at our center. But most importantly, we reminded one another that it is more than OK, it is faithful, to be uncomfortable in our ministries because after all, it is not our ministry! It is Christ's ministry! And as pastor or lay person, we all hope, humans that we are, that what we say and do as Christians is pointing to another direction-away from us and toward our Lord.

Just as others needed to listen to the awkward, sometimes irritating, voice of John the Baptist from the wilderness, maybe God is telling us that we need to listen to some of the Advent voices around us today, voices outside the circle of our comfort, even when those voices are hard to hear. Peter's words for us today are also ones to which we need to listen. This is how one commentator talked about Epistle lesson today: If you want a clean house, plan a party and invite some guests. There is nothing like a deadline to encourage the reluctant housekeeper to get the lead out and start cleaning! If I do not have any special plans, it is easy to let the clutter pile up, ignore the dust bunnies, and deal with a little dirt. A mess is not all that bad if no one else sees it, right?

Interesting how human beings are like houses in that respect. Without constant attention, our lives can all too easily become cluttered with distractions, and layered in dirt and grime. We become so overwhelmed by the daily details and petty little influences that before we know it, it is hard to recognize ourselves in the messes we have made. We find ourselves in need of a spiritual garage sale and some Holy Spirit super cleaning to set things aright again.

And that is one of the reasons I appreciate the season of Advent. We are all of us invited to share a common purpose during a common time. We are invited to focus ever so much more on asking Christ into our hearts and lives. It is not that we cannot do this same thing year round, but Advent is that call to slow down and live into the longings of our spirits, that longing to be all the Christ-child has come to save.

During Advent, we are encouraged to hear and listen to the call of John the Baptist, Peter, and other prophetic voices to clean our human houses and make ready to welcome the Lord. Our spiritual houses, do not have to be McMansions, and they do not have to be professionally decorated. A clean space and a warm welcome are all that is needed. Nothing fancy is required, nothing but readiness and openness to God's amazing mercy and grace. Jesus is looking for a clean sweep, so to speak, a complete turning. Jesus is seeking humble hearts.

So, how would we answer Peter's question, "...what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God?"

The Son came into our world as a helpless, dependent child born under less than ideal circumstances. He lived as a refugee in a foreign land, and he died the death of a common criminal to conquer death once and for all eternity. Jesus is no ordinary king. He comes again and again, seeking and loving and comforting—both tender and strong. He will come and make this world right at the end in order for the advent of a new beginning. When, we do not know. So grab your broom and sweep out the cobwebs that cling stubbornly to worn out ways of being. Dust off that tired hope you are hiding. Dance that mop across the smooth expanse of your dreams, and make ready for the advent of God.

And one final question for us to ponder this season. Prophets of old, John the Baptist, Peter, and yes, prophets of new, how do we know if the discomfiting things they preach are the truth or just a bunch of misinformed, self-serving shallow rhetoric? John the Baptizer gives us some help when he preaches a radical message repenting, turning around, changing directions and when he baptizes because emerging from the waters comes the symbolism of a truly changed course for our lives. Our hearts and souls are forever changed. We choose how to live out that change.

But the ultimate test of one preaching the Word of God: he or she is pointing in another direction, pointing away from self and pointing to Jesus. John points away from his ego and ambition and he proclaims, "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."

As we prepare for the Advent of our Lord, in what direction are our lives pointing?