

*Turning Our Lives Around*

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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Isaiah 11.6-9 (NRSV)

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.  
They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea.

Matthew 3.1-12 (NRSV)

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 spoke when he said,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 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.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

**ONE: The Challenge**

Were John the Baptist to walk into our sanctuary right now, the sparks would fly almost immediately. He was an in-your-face kind of guy. Living the way he did, we might smell him before we saw him but I have the feeling that we could hear him even before the smell. I imagine John

bellowed his message so even the hearing impaired might pay attention.

Everything about John was odd including where he lived, how he dressed, and what he ate<sup>1</sup> and everything about him would challenge us.

- He lived in the wilderness, always associated in people's minds with loneliness, lunacy, and a lack of sociability. Besides, eking out a living in the wilderness was brutal and made people who lived there a little cranky. That's John.
- His clothing was made from the hides of camels and tied with a leather belt. It reminded people of what the great prophet Elijah wore. Of course, Elijah was an in-your-face kind of guy too. It was also believed that Elijah would return before the Messiah came. Was John he?
- Then there was his diet. That he ate locusts is not remarkable or even that he flavored them with honey. What is remarkable is that this appears to have been all that he ate. Even the poorest in the land usually subsisted on wheat or barley bread and depending on their location, some fish and perhaps some fruit like figs. But John's diet was poorer than the poorest.

In other words, John's work required extreme sacrifice and he challenges us to consider what we might sacrifice, if anything, to do God's work today. John's lifestyle challenges our addiction to comfort and material prosperity. He challenges us to count what matters to God as more important than what our culture values.

But it's not just lifestyle. John's message also challenges. He called the religious leaders — people like me — of his day “a brood of vipers.” Calling someone a snake is nasty but the insult was much deeper than just that. Back then people commonly thought that vipers hatched inside their mother and gnawed their way out killing their mothers in the process. And, since parent murder was the most reprehensible of sins, calling someone a brood of vipers was to accuse them of matricide. Any of us would get a little testy if that kind of invective were hurled in our face.

Most of all, John proclaimed that God was coming in One who would rule unchallenged and establish perfect justice and peace. Only those who already were submitting to God's rule in the present would be ready. If people were not right with God, they would need to repent, turn around, and head their lives towards God, and walk in the light of the Lord.

Truth is, John's challenges do not fit the mood or focus of Advent as we think about getting ready for another Christmas. And if I were to completely adopt John's approach with you, it wouldn't take too much time before there would be talk in the parking lot, and eventually meetings held behind my back, and calls to the powers that be at presbytery. If I still stuck with it, eventually there would be a congregational meeting and you would vote me out of here. The stated reasons would be something else but the truth would be that we don't like people getting in our face. We don't like people who in the name of God tell us we have to change. For a few Sundays, maybe. But as a steady diet? No way! So I may be dumb but I'm not stupid and I don't want to be a John the Baptist for you.

But what about his challenge to us? We may not like it. But if we turn away from it, are we

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<sup>1</sup> Craig S. Keener in Roger E. Van Harn, ed., *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Third Readings (The Gospels)* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001) 12-13.

really turning away from God? That's a very serious question.

## TWO: The Response

As I wrestled with it, I was actually helped by someone who lived a long time ago. John Chrysostom (347-407) was a late fourth century theologian and preacher, and for a time, bishop of Constantinople. In a sermon he preached on this text about John the Baptist, Chrysostom said this:

“See how great is the wisdom of the Baptist in his preaching? Note how he states his case without compromise, unafraid of alarming his hearers and filling them with anxiety. Yet his very next words are mild, speaking of that which is apt to make them recover. He does not dwell on the axe alone or the tree that is cut down, burned and thrown into the fire, or the wrath to come, but also speaks of the remission of sins, the removal of punishment, righteousness, sanctification, redemption, adoption and community, a partaking of the inheritance and an abundant supply of the Holy Spirit. For to all these remedies John implicitly pointed when he said, ‘He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’ At once, by this very figure of speech, John witnessed to the abundance of grace. He did not say ‘He will give you the Holy Spirit’ but ‘He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’ Then to specify the volatile and uncontrollable quality of divine grace he adds, ‘and with fire.’”<sup>2</sup>

Now, there are a lot of fancy words in that quote but here's what spoke to me. Chrysostom saw the challenge in John's message but he also saw the hope. John the Baptist challenges us to admit that we need God. If we don't admit that we need God, then there is no hope. But as soon as we admit our need, John assures us that we are baptized in the Spirit — our lives are turned around and headed towards God. As Chrysostom said: “John witnessed to the abundance of grace.” The point is, when we admit our need for God, it doesn't bring judgment as we might fear, quite the contrary. Admitting our need for God brings grace.

So what do we need from God? From what do we need to be saved today? Here's a pretty good list I ran across last week and I added a few of my own. We need to be saved from:

- the sadness and sickness of heart many of us experience this time of year because someone we loved has died;
- those who act violently against their children, partners, neighbors or strangers, and from our own capacity for violence;
- addictions of every kind and from those whose addictions cause pain to others;
- the ravages of cancer, AIDS, Alzheimer's, and other illnesses whose names are familiar only to those who suffer from them;
- unresolved anger, fear or hurt which threaten our own wholeness and our relationships with others;
- pride and self-righteousness, admitting no possibility for change or growth;
- allowing ourselves to be too busy, to always work and never play;
- our capacity to say and do hurtful things to those we love, including God;

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<sup>2</sup> Chrysostom, *The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 11.4* quoted in Manlio Simonetti, ed., “*Matthew 1-13*,” *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament*, vol. 1a (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001) 47.

- complacency and apathy, the kind that allow us to praise the baby Jesus while forgetting the crucified Christ;<sup>3</sup>
- the fear of growing old, of being alone, of dying, of being separated from God.

Your own list might be longer or shorter. But there is much from which we need to be saved and our need for God is great.

So remember John's promise and Isaiah's before him. The Coming One will baptize us with the Spirit. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the goats while a small child plays around them. The promise is that they will not hurt or destroy. They and we will enjoy each other's company, all on God's holy mountain. The earth shall be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. That's the promise. But, John tells us, if we do not believe it, claim it, and live as though it were true — for it is true, then we are not turning our lives around towards God. We must live in the hope of the promise.

### Conclusion

Many of you know the story of Sadako Sasaki. She was born in Japan in 1943. She was in Hiroshima when the atom bomb was dropped on August 6, 1945. She survived the bomb blast and its immediate aftermath, but when she was 11, she developed leukemia. During her months in the hospital, Sadako's best friend told her that the crane, a sacred bird in Japan, grants a wish to someone who folds a thousand paper cranes. So Sadako acted on that hope, making as many cranes as her energy would allow, day after day. The origami cranes became her strength and her courage. Her initial wish was to get well but her health gradually deteriorated. So Sadako began to wish instead for something more, something bigger. She wished for world peace, that children could live, safe from the effects of wars. Just after she had made her 654th crane, Sadako died. Her classmates folded 346 more, so that 1,000 cranes were buried with her.

Although she died without finishing, Sadako's dream did not die. After her death, several friends began raising money for the creation of a national peace monument. This memorial in Sadako's name was constructed in Hiroshima's National Peace Park. The statue depicts Sadako standing on top of a granite pedestal holding a golden crane in her arms. At the base of the statue a plaque reads, "This is our cry, this is our prayer, peace in the world."

After the monument was erected, people from all over the world sent paper cranes to place on the monument for Peace Day on August 6. This tradition has continued and for kids and adults the paper crane has remained a symbol of peace for children around the world.<sup>4</sup>

Friends, if the simple hope of a dying Japanese girl and a paper crane can still witness to the longing for peace, how much more so can the manger in Bethlehem and the One born there witness to our hope for God's promise. Living in the hope of that promise turns our lives around towards God. When we do that, I think even crusty, old John the Baptist would be happy. And I know we will be walking in the light of the Lord.

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<sup>3</sup> This compelling list is mostly from Rochelle A. Stackhouse, "Invitation To Healing," *Lectionary Homiletics* 16.1 (2004-2005): 15.

<sup>4</sup> The Sadako Story, online, <http://www.sadako.org/sadakostory.htm>, Internet, 4 Dec. 2004.