

Second Sunday, December 8, 2013
Advent 2 - Year A
Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Prepare the way of the Lord

John the Baptist is a figure whom we meet up with each year in the middle two weeks of Advent. This is no accident. It is a way of telling us that we all need to wake up, pay attention and prepare ourselves to say Yes to God who comes to us in the person of Christ Jesus, who lived and died as one of us—and who, as the Risen One, continually seeks to abide with us in the totality of our being, and enlists us in his ongoing mission of repairing the world. In our first reading, the 8th century B.C.E. prophet Isaiah envisioned a shoot coming out of the stump of the tree of Jesse—out of the ruins of the Kingdom of Israel whose kings had a lineage going back all the way to King David and his father, Jesse. In the midst of the ruined Israel which had been conquered and taken into exile by the Assyrians in 721 B.C.E., Isaiah envisioned a peaceable kingdom that would be ushered in and led by a little child—an amazing prophecy. The Book of Isaiah was actually written and added onto over several hundred years. And so, later in this same book of Isaiah, the then sixth century B.C.E. prophet envisioned preparing a way in the wilderness as a *geographic* route which his fellow Judeans would travel home after the Kingdom of Judah's destruction in 586 B.C.E. and their exile in Babylon.

Now fast forward 600 more years, and in our gospel we hear of John the Baptist calling his contemporaries, now under Roman domination, to prepare the way of the Lord and make a right pathway to God—*first in their own hearts*. Prepare the way of the Lord and make a straight--a right--pathway through the windings of sin and the rough ways of selfishness and fear, through the mountains and hills of arrogance, and the valleys of discouragement and despair—so that God can make a home in your heart. John's message of conversion called for a reordering of personal and societal priorities with the understanding that we all share a common humanity and common longings as children of God. In order to drive his point home, though, John speaks with a voice of focused anger—an anger fueled by compassion and rooted in hope. The Kingdom of God and God's Messiah were coming all right, John says, but if you thought it was going to be like an afternoon tea party you'd better think again. You bunch of snakes, you'd better shape up; and don't think your ancestry and religious affiliation and the privilege and prestige that go with that will get you any more points than those stones over there, John yells. So clean up your life as if your life depended on it, which it does, John insists—and get baptized, which for John was a public sign that you were serious about the process of cleaning up your life. No one ever accused John the Baptist of being the life of the party. But if he wasn't fun, he sure was important. Here he is in our Advent pathway toward Jesus, John, this snarling

watch dog, John, this Baptizer right in our face with focused anger. So, we'd better deal with him and what he is saying to us.

John appeared on the scene looking and acting very much like one of the prophets from an earlier time. What John the Baptist taught—and all true prophets teach—is that love and anger work in harness and that anger directed appropriately can awaken and renew bonds of love. John's love of God—his passion for God's purposes of wholeness and justice—burned so deeply and brilliantly and hot in him that on more than one occasion he rose up angry. John the Baptist had a lover's quarrel, directing his anger at all that was separating people from God's presence and purpose in their lives.

John did use some awful images—of vipers, wrath, wielding axes, pruning dead limbs, sweeping away chaff, and fire. But, he believed God's purpose is not to harm or destroy; rather, God's purpose is always to clear the way for new fruit, new grain, new life. The anger in this prophetic tradition is not fueled by ideology or stereotypes; nor is it based on attitudes of bitterness and revenge. Rather, it is an anger that loves the good and so hates the evil, while understanding, as St. Augustine put it, that you should, "Never fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside of yourself." Prophetic anger is rooted in the grief and direct experience of witnessing and absorbing injuries and injustices. It is rooted in loving compassion for all whose human dignity has been diminished or trampled upon. It's a just anger that ignites into action and fires up people to change the way they think and act. John's anger, fueled by his passion for God and his compassion for others, was also rooted in hope.ⁱ And as St. Augustine put it:

"Of the three virtues of faith, hope and love, hope is the greatest. Faith only tells us that God is. Love only tells us that God is good. But hope tells us that God will work God's will, And hope has two lovely daughters, anger and courage. Anger so that what cannot be, may not be. And courage, so that what must be, will be."

There is a big difference though, between having good anger and just being an angry person. As I said, John displayed a kind of confrontational anger that was connected to both his passion for God and his compassion for all God's people. Confrontation with focused anger can be an authentic expression of compassion. Now if the word "compassion" only makes us think of caring people healing each other's wounds, and the word "confrontation" only makes us think of shouting people venting their frustration and rage, then indeed compassion and anger are at opposite poles. But by thinking this way, we can sentimentalize compassion and brutalize confrontation. Sadly enough, Jesus has been presented so often as a meek and mild person that we seldom realize how differently the gospels actually describe him. Fortunately, John the Baptist still stands out in our minds as one for whom anger—focused anger--was an appropriate response.

Unfortunately, what we see so often expressed in our culture these days is an

unfocused anger, disconnected from understanding and compassion. Remember the great thinker Calvin—no, not John Calvin; I mean Calvin as in “Calvin and Hobbes”—the little seven-year old cartoon character. As I read Calvin I thought about the louder and often shriller voices that get the most media attention, whether in the debates over immigration or health care, in the intractable crises in the Middle East and other places of conflict and war, or in Tea Party rants or the dozens of talk radio and TV shows or on the Internet’s “blogosphere.” In one cartoon we hear Calvin lament,

“Doesn’t it seem like everybody just shouts at each other nowadays? I think it’s because conflict is drama, and drama is entertaining, and entertainment is marketable. Finding consensus and common ground is dull! Nobody wants to watch a civilized discussion that acknowledges ambiguity and complexity. We want to see fireworks! We want the sense of solidarity and identity that comes from having our interests narrowed and exploited by like-minded zealots. Talk show hosts, political candidates, [so-called] news programs, special interest groups...They all become successful by reducing debates to the level of shouted rage. Nothing gets solved, but we’re all entertained.”

Such insight from a seven-year old cartoon character! In contrast to this, John’s anger had godly values in which it was grounded, thus giving it proper focus and control—values such as perspective, prudence, self-criticism, humility, understanding and forgiveness. This also describes Nelson Mandela whose life and witness we celebrate today. And, this is the anger St. Paul meant when he wrote, “Be angry, but do not sin...and do not make room for the devil” (Ephesians 4:26-27).

John the Baptist still calls us today to make straight in our hearts and our world a highway for God, and to reorder personal and societal priorities. As commentator Martin Smith put it, “Those who long for a world of fairness, compassion, sharing and justice are always told that the obstacles to these goals are insurmountable, so we must settle for less. The essence of [John’s] prophecy is the courageous exposure of the fictitious character of these supposed obstacles to justice. There is a way forward to the reign of God; [and] Grace breaks through impasses of every kind.”ⁱⁱ

So, John’s quarrel with the world was deep down a lover’s quarrel, not a hater’s quarrel. Today we need such a countervailing anger, focused and grounded in loving compassion and hope. We can only say yes to God in Christ coming into our midst by also being able to say a focused no to evil, fear, ignorance and injustice in our hearts and in the wider world. Only then can we prepare the way of the Lord instead of preventing or getting in the way. Our two main Biblical companions in the Advent journey are John the Baptist and his denunciations, and Mary and her annunciation. Advent calls us to prepare for the act of God that strikes down falsehood, selfishness, hopelessness—even death—in the coming of Jesus Christ. And we know that God is angry. After all, it’s God’s world, and

God has a right to be angry. But we are also told by Jesus to not be afraid; for we know that the One who comes to judge us and our world is the One who loves us most of all. So as we prepare the way of the Lord in our hearts and world, let us await the coming of the One who as promised by John will baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire, that fire from heaven which is not a punishing fire of destruction nor damnation, but rather a refining, cleansing fire which alone sears through cold hearts and can warm, enlighten and purify our lives and this good earth.

ⁱ With the anger and courage of hope, John called out and denounced the spiritual short-sightedness, moral deafness and narrow-mindedness he encountered in his day—such as in some religious leaders who were so focused on their rules and rituals but forgot to seek or find the bonds of their common humanity with those not walking the same path as they; or in the hurried and harried lives of many ordinary people who seem unable to reflect a sense of God's presence in their lives; or in the unlawful marriage contracted by King Herod—a denunciation by John that literally cost John his head. John did not tolerate the intolerable. He knew that to lower his anger at the oppressor would have been to lessen his love for the oppressed. Having said that, John would understand William Sloane Coffin's statement that, "If you love the good, you must hate the evil; but if you hate the evil more than you love the good, you just become a damn good hater; and the world has plenty of such people."

ⁱⁱ Martin L. Smith, "The Desert Highway" in Sojourners (Washington D.C.: December 2012), Dec. 9 entry.