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Matthew 3:1-12

PROPHETS MAKE LOUSY DINNER GUESTS

Wednesday afternoon I spoke at the first annual Day of Peace and Justice at Oklahoma City Community College. I was invited by our own Ken Meador who belongs to the Advocates for Peace group at OCCC, which is sponsored by Professor Steve Morrow from the Humanities Department. There was food, speakers and a march for peace around campus...all the prerequisites for a good gathering of hippie-types. But I was really intrigued by what I heard. Yes, there is still a lot of post-election frustration and even anger amongst this mostly liberal crowd, but this collection of professed peace-loving people was also really willing to look in the mirror. Speaker after speaker talked about the ways that we must change ourselves and that peace wasn't something that we bought (if only we could find a store that carried it) or that we elected, but rather a way that we lived our lives.

These were young people willing to turn their lives around...to change their minds about themselves, to change their minds about people they might have previously dismissed with a label and to change their mind about what is possible...but more importantly how change is possible. The next generation I see as increasingly unwilling to think of change as something external - as something that we acquire or vote on, but instead place their stock in the conversion of the heart. Its not that politics don't matter or that government doesn't have a role to play in addressing poverty or suffering, its just that the cry of "coming judgment" or a promised deliverance from our present crisis is a lot more hands-on than it used to be.

This is kind of like John the Baptist's environment. Things are bad, people are quite dissatisfied with their leaders and their lot in life and they are reaching for change via something external. Oh, if only I had an example of a large group of people looking for "Change They Can Believe In" or "Hope" or someone who will just say, "Yes, We Can". You know, promises made that there will be a new tomorrow and all we have to do is vote - oh, that would be a good analogy. Except that John

throws this little word in there – repent. So it is more than an external process John is calling for. If things are to change, we must change them by being different people, not just believing in different people.

Now that's something worth crying out about, even from the wilderness – although I'm not sure that's the best way to get heard. I mean the general feeling these days is that things are bad. The economy is down, the job market bleak, the pressures of daily life increased with such tension...we are cutting budgets right and left and the things on the chopping block get more and more serious and we simultaneously worry if our elected leaders will do anything and what they might be capable of...and then we are at war with seemingly everything from drugs to terrorism to immigration to whatever football team happens to represent pure evil to you. Things are pretty dark. Yet even with that level of discontent, I cannot imagine a scene in which people are flocking to a preacher dressed in wild clothes down at the Oklahoma River baptizing people for repentance of their sins. I mean first off, most people think that the mess we're in is because of other people's sins, not theirs and second, the last time people got into that river most of them got sick...which adds another thing to that list of reasons to be discontent.

I just don't get the sense that people are really ready to listen to a voice crying out from the wilderness. Even the prophetic cries of impending judgment don't seem to permeate the veil of either apathy or indifference. And the “coming savior” motif has been played out and it rings kind of hollow now. Besides, more and more of us are coming to terms with the fact that we have already had a savior...and perhaps we might try listening to that one instead of seeking something new. Here during Advent we are reminded that we await (again) the birth of Jesus...the arrival of the one to show us the way...but this is past tense. He has arrived. The way has been shown.

I think it kind of strange that in our Advent readings we have this tale of John the Baptist from Matthew. I mean even Matthew places this after the birth of Jesus in his storyline. So why are we reading this 3 weeks prior? Well, I think that it has something to do with the fact that John is announcing something, just as Advent announces something. After all, we're not just waiting like the men in Samuel Beckett's absurdist play “Waiting for Godot” in which the two main characters wait for an unknown third character called “Godot” who never appears and, as we discover, is himself largely unknown to the main characters at all. They claim to know him, but then soon admit that they wouldn't even recognize him if they saw him. As they wait in vain, they eat, sleep, argue, fight, laugh, play and do anything they can to keep the dreadful silence and absence of Godot at bay. He never shows. It has been said that “Waiting for Godot” has achieved the impossible in theater – absolutely nothing going on onstage and the audience glued to their seats.

That's not the kind of waiting that prophets usually proclaim. In fact, John the Baptist is not announcing waiting at all – he is ready for action. “Repent”, he cries, “For the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” It isn't coming...it is here. What John announces is that he is only preparing the way – an idea that either he or the early Christian community gets from Isaiah. The one who is coming has an even more profound baptism to offer. And John expects this person soon. He claims him coming with a baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire – winnowing fork in hand, ready to separate wheat from chaff and burn up those who don't make the grade. John was close. Jesus was coming to offer a whole different kind of baptism, but he wasn't bringing some terrible judgment that puts some of us into the fire. I mean we're not inferring much to think that John means some will be rewarded and others punished. I just don't see punishment in the life and teachings of Jesus. I do see judgment, but not punishment.

That's where I think that John the prophet gets his prophetic message wrong. Judgment and punishment are not the same thing. Oh we don't have to look much further than our own penal system to realize that we think they are, but I don't see Jesus saying that. Jesus pronounces judgment in the same way that guilt works on us. Oh, guilt gets a bad rap. There is certainly a negative side to guilt – guilt that paralyzes or humiliates. But guilt can also be the warning, the third rail that reminds us where we are not supposed to go, the twinge of pain that tells us that move is just beyond the threshold of our flexibility. Judgment and guilt can be useful detail tools – things to sharpen or hone us. They are both terrible hammers and worthless tools to use on someone else.

The problem is, judgment is the area of expertise for the prophet. It is what John (and Isaiah and Micah and Amos and Jesus) have in great abundance. But please note what their judgment announces. It calls for repentance. All the prophets ask for inner reflection, for a change of heart, for the people of God to start bearing fruit worthy of that title. See, John says that as plainly as anyone...we have our titles mixed up. We think that being the child of this family or that person is what matters. We think that our heritage as citizens of this nation or as heirs of a certain lineage makes us worthy. All the while we forget that if we need to focus on titles, we can stop with "child of God".

OK, maybe that message gets a little lost in the predictive rants of most of the biblical prophets. Mostly we get messages that seem pretty light on warm and fuzzy and pretty heavy on fire and punishment. Let's just face it, prophets can really be jerks. Not always, of course, some of the most profound statements in the Bible come from prophets, but really...sometimes they are just hateful. Oh, we preachers like to use them a lot and kind of act as apologists for their confrontational and judgmental attitudes, but the truth is that they can be the most pessimistic, arrogant and abusive folks around. As I heard one pastor say once, they are rude....like ALL

CAPS rude, you know? Blasting away at us with no manners whatsoever, like a kindergartener who interrupts your perfectly lovely conversation over tea with the emphatic announcement that he is going potty!

John gets portrayed as this wild man in the desert. He wears clothing made from camel's hair and eats locusts and honey, maybe because he can't get anyone to invite him to dinner. I mean after all, listen to the way that he treats people. First he calls people out to repent and be baptized for their sins and then when they show up he calls at least some of them the "brood of vipers". Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Well, John...you did. Don't you remember that whole crying out from the wilderness thing?

And while John the Baptist emphasizes harsh judgment, the reading for today from Isaiah offers a different picture, even though Isaiah has plenty of judgment to hand out. A branch will grow from the root of Jesse, Isaiah says, a new king greater even than the beloved king David. With the spirit of the Lord resting upon him, this king will reign with righteousness and justice. A new day of harmony will dawn, a time when born enemies, predator and prey, will live together in peace. This is the imagery that the early pre-Christian community went to in order to try and contend with the trauma of Jesus' execution. I don't think that Isaiah was predicting Jesus, but it was sure comforting for the grieving community of Jesus to think that. It was the only thing that made the tragic make any sense at all. But one thing is for sure, it is very different than John's vision of one who will come like an axe to fell the fruitless trees.

Isaiah's image wins out for me, by and large, because – as it turns out – John was wrong. He was just wrong about Jesus and we know it pretty quickly. John spends his life teaching and baptizing to separate the wheat from the chaff, but Jesus doesn't come to weed out the good from the bad, he comes to expand everyone's notion of how large God's love really is. Now John isn't completely off-base. He does tell the Pharisees and the Sadducees that what they think accounts for goodness in the eyes of God isn't on target. Sarah Dylan Bruer notes that John is calling out what anthropologists today call "redemptive media" – the things that are seen in a particular culture to make a person good, respectable, successful. Lineage is one of them. Heck, even Matthew falls prey to this. The entire first chapter of Matthew's gospel is a far-reaching and protracted attempt to tie Jesus to the house of David. But John says God can raise up children of Abraham from the rocks. That alone doesn't cut it. Being born as Abraham's descendent in the "right" sort of family won't boost your status in God's eyes any more than being born as a gentile to the "wrong" sort of parents will lessen your status in God's eyes. He says that everyone needs to repent, which in Ancient Greek means to literally turn around. Here's some geeky linguistic info – that Greek word *Metanoieite* appears here in what is called the present imperative form...meaning that it indicates a sustained, not limited action. It

is action, not belief...so John is calling out that people must do different things, not believe different things.

This is kind of like our UCC slogan – no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here. But being welcome and being transformed are two different things. We are a church that is about welcoming, but we are also about transformation. Yes, come in the door...yes, come to the table...yes, be a part of this community. But don't think that simply coming to church on Sunday brings you salvation. It's like the election season we just went through. Every politician in this state feels it is crucial to announce that they are Christian and boldly demonstrate that they go to church. But this passage tells us, save your declarations, put your bumper stickers and t-shirts away. If you want to be known as a Christian, start caring for the widows and orphans...for the least powerful, most marginalized among us. Save your judgment for yourself. If you suddenly find yourself no longer in need of it, I imagine that you will be in a place where you could then pass judgment on others, but you won't.

Judgment (except, I would argue, for healthy self-criticism) doesn't get us any closer to God. We'd be far better off actually practicing that whole welcoming theme more fully. It is a much better starting point than judgment. And the truth is that even in the UCC, and this church in particular, we don't do a great job of it. We still live in this tension of an “in-group” and an “out-group” and that tension hangs like a millstone around our necks, keeping us trapped in the difficulty of figuring out who belongs and who doesn't when the real lesson is that God's love is expanding too fast for any of us to keep track. So why are we keeping track? One of the great preachers of our time, William Sloane Coffin, once said, “...don't let money tell you who you are. Don't let power tell you who you are. Don't let enemies and -- for God's sake -- don't let your sins tell you who you are. Don't prove yourself. That's taken care of. All we have to do is express ourselves. It's difficult, but we're a lot more alive in pain than in complacency.”

We are Advent people. We live in a state of preparation. To be Advent people means that we are constantly aware of Advent not as a chronological period, but a way of being present to the announcement of new life in every situation, to the arrival of God's very human love at every turn. And if we worry less about less, about who is in and who is out...if we profess more often our trust than our certainty...when we speak with a prophetic voice that announces holiness as practicing love, compassion and justice...well, we'll get invited to more dinner parties, that's for sure...but we'll also be a step closer to the very thing for which we are preparing. The kind of new life and radical hope announced by Advent and by our communion together...so, come to the table.

AMEN