

“Advent’s Disruption”
 delivered Sunday, December 6, 2009
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 Luke 3:1-18
 Advent 2

You cannot get to Christmas without going through John the Baptist. You just can’t do it. Every year I try to get on with Christmas and leave John and his grumpy Advent warnings in the dust. This year my family came home from our Thanksgiving trip to the mountains with our Christmas tree on top of the car. The manger scene already adorns the mantle. I’ve about finished my Christmas shopping, and I would like to say it’s just because work gets crazy for me this time of year with all the worship and pastoral visits and church parties, but the truth of the matter is... I love to get ready for Christmas. I love the lights, I love the music, I love the memories of Christmases past, I love newer family traditions. I love it all – except for the fact that all four gospels insist we cannot get to Christmas without having a shouting match in the wilderness with John the Baptist.

You have got to admit he disrupts the spirit of the season – calling us a “brood of vipers,” and warning us of the wrath to come. With our Advent devotions in hand, our Shandon traditions of supporting the poor, our prayers and our praise, nonetheless John plants his feet in our well-intentioned path toward Christmas and will not let us go around him. I just wish some little Who down in Whoville would start singing within earshot of John so his heart would increase, and we could celebrate pure holiday joy every second Sunday of Advent, but no, we must and forever go toe to toe and face to face with John.

You know, John the Baptist reminds me of the Salvation Army bell ringers in front of all the stores. They are, admittedly, quite a bit more passive than John, but they stand there every year in front of our idols of consumerism reminding us that this season is about more than shopping and gift giving and getting. If you don’t just drop a dollar in and walk by them as fast as you can; rather - if you think about who they are and where they come from, you realize the Salvation Army folk are not unlike John the Baptist. They use pretty strong language, for one thing. They call themselves an "army" to indicate that the organization is a fighting force, constantly at war with the powers of evil. Like John they promote a total ministry for the total person.

Founded by a preacher in the Wesleyan tradition, William Booth and his wife Catherine, the Salvation Army began in the 1850’s in the streets of London. Booth wanted to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to the kind of outcasts and sinners Jesus himself hung around with – the poor, the homeless, the hungry, the destitute, prostitutes, thieves, gamblers. William Booth’s evangelistic fervor led to disagreement with church leaders, who preferred more traditional methods of evangelism, and who did not welcome the kinds of people into their churches that Booth sought to tell about Christ. As a result, Booth withdrew from the church and traveled throughout England, conducting evangelistic meetings. In 1865, he was invited to hold a series of revivals in the impoverished East End of London. He set up a tent in a Quaker graveyard, and the Salvation Army was born in that cemetery to spread the gospel to people the church would not have. (1)

That’s who John the Baptist is. He doesn’t have much use for institutional religion. He is a reformer. He needs no building. He cares seriously about people’s souls. He is a religious

fanatic who gets in the way of our beautiful Christmas traditions with his locust eating bad breath, his smelly old fur coat, his wild-eyed prophecy, and his message of repentance, of turning from the ways of this world and turning toward God. And yet, we try to push John to the periphery kind of like the way the old Salvation Army got pushed out of the church.

Think about it... We don't cast John in our Christmas pageants. There is not a parent here with a child in the Christmas pageant who has called Anne McNair and asked for her child to be cast in the role of John. However, I am quite confident that there are more than a few of our children who would clamor for the part to scam out the line, "You brood of vipers!" John has no place in our manger scenes; he rarely makes the front of a Christmas card except for the occasional copy of a Renaissance painting that pictures an innocuous baby John in little fur outfit with a cross in his hand pointing to baby Jesus. We have omitted John from Christmas. But you still can't just drop a dollar in the bucket and get easily around him.

With his weird fixation on evil, and his shouting God's impending judgment, John is a profound disruption. He shows up at the beginning of every gospel saying that the coming of Jesus is serious business. Life cannot go on unchanged. You need to repent – to turn from your usual ways and turn toward the ways of God.

"What should we do?" the crowds ask him. Whoever has two coats, he says, give one of them to someone who has none. And if you have food, go and give some of it to those who are hungry. To tax collectors who were notorious for skimming off the top for themselves, he says, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." To soldiers who were accustomed to bullying people, he said, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats and be satisfied with your wages." When the crowd pushed him to be specific and relevant, despite his calling them snakes in the grass, John does not ask for earth shattering changes in people's lives. He simply invites us to do what is just and right, to be charitable toward those in need, to turn away from our usual worldly ways, and turn toward God who is coming into the world, into our world.

Did you notice that Luke does something none of the other gospel writers do with John the Baptist? Luke introduces John historically among politicians and national leaders, among military powers and religious giants. The first verse of our scripture lists no less than seven historical figures in order to locate the time and place of John. Several of them will show up again. Emperor Tiberius. Governor Pontius Pilate. Brothers Herod and Philip. Annas and Caiaphus. These are the political, military, and religious rulers of the world in a time very much like our time. It was as if thirty thousand troops had been called up for war. The economy was in a shambles; poverty was rampant, children were hungry. Luke's inclusion of this powerful, mighty, formidable cast of characters is to emphasize that God was bringing salvation to our historical, political world – for all people.

That word first came to John in the wilderness, of all people, and he picked it up and pointed to Jesus Christ. In our time, in our own history, John shouts with great urgency, God is doing a new thing! Get ready. Turn away from evil. Be good to your neighbor and those in need. Ask for forgiveness; forgive one another. Be prepared for the coming of Jesus Christ. My friends, the world will not be saved by democracy or any other political ideology, although people of faith should care about human freedom. The world will not be made safe by military power in our country or another, although people of faith should care about war and peace. The world won't even be saved by religion, although people of faith are called to practice what we preach with integrity. The world, rather, is being saved by the power of God who skips over all earthly powers – Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Caiaphus – God skips over all earthly powers to make a home in an unwed mother's womb, and thus – in the human heart.

Look toward that power, John the Baptist says: on the outside – treat people right; on the inside – repent, turn, forgive. Get ready for God’s power to come from on high by preparing yourself, is John’s Advent greeting, as he invites us to prepare for Christ who comes.

I don’t know about you, but this year maybe more than ever before – given what’s going on in our world – I welcome John the Baptist. His utter disruption helps us put this whole season into perspective like none other. Once the word of God had come to John in the wilderness – he saw only one thing, he pointed to only one thing, he proclaimed only one thing: Jesus Christ is coming into the world, and in him all flesh shall see the salvation of God. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) History of Salvation Army remembered and details taken from their website, salvationarmyusa.org.