

Advent 2A – Repent!

I speak to you in the name of He who Is, who Was and who is Yet to Come. Amen

The theme for this week is Peace and the character we focus on is John the Baptist. It's an interesting clashing of themes because when I think of John the Baptist, peaceful is not something that comes to mind.

John the Baptist and Jesus are related, through their mothers Elizabeth and Mary. We know the story of Mary going to visit her cousin Elizabeth who is far along in her pregnancy while Mary is newly pregnant.

The angel Gabriel goes to see Zechariah and Elizabeth eavesdrops on the conversation. When she hears she is to have a child she is astounded and a little skeptical. The angel doesn't speak directly to Elizabeth, rather, she learns what is to happen and that her son shall be named John from Zechariah.

Gabriel also goes to see Mary and announce that she will bear a son. Upon hearing this pronouncement she, too is skeptical. But, like all good first century Galilean women, she bursts into song.

Gabriel then goes to see Joseph and explain that Mary is having a child which is not his, but God's. Gabriel tells Joseph to believe Mary when she tells him she is pregnant and he does so.

In the first reading for today we hear the prophet Isaiah talk about "the shoot that shall come from the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots". (Isaiah 11.1, NRSV) If you go back and read Chapter 1 of the Gospel of Matthew you'll read of the Genealogy of Jesus. Elizabeth and Mary are cousins. Whether they are first cousins or fourth cousins we do not know...only that they were related to one another.

Elizabeth was having a miracle baby of her own. Elizabeth is considered elderly to be having a baby and in some translations is referred to "as good as dead". Rude!

Mary hears the wonderful news that Elizabeth is having a baby and goes to visit her, just after discovering that she, too is pregnant. She sees her cousin who is advanced in her pregnancy and as she greets Elizabeth the child in her womb leapt for joy. That child, is John.

Elizabeth recognizes the "glow" in Mary's face and pronounces her pregnant with the Messiah. That's when Mary bursts into song, the one we know as the Magnificat.

John and Jesus were raised in very different ways, as it was ordained in Scripture. John would be the one to announce the coming of the Messiah and yet, often he was mistaken for the Messiah.

Jesus is described as one being gentle, who embraced all around him and chose his words carefully.

His cousin John? Not so much.

In one of the most amazing turns of phrase, John calls the assembled faithful a "brood of vipers" (Matthew 3.7, NRSV) after the Pharisees and Sadducees were gathering to be baptised. We're not told why they were coming to be baptised, although I suspect it was because John was walking around from place to place bellowing at folks that they needed to "repent for the kingdom of heaven is drawing near" (Matthew 3.1, NRSV)

Remember, the scholars and leaders of the day would be aware of Isaiah's prophecy that there would be a voice in the wilderness calling, announcing, that there would be a Messiah. He himself would not be the Messiah, yet would announce the coming of the Messiah.

Pharisees and Sadducees hearing this would approach John because they wanted to make sure they were prepared for the coming of the Messiah and would then be prepared to enter the kingdom of God.

John is described as such, "now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey". (Matthew 1.4, NRSV) He was not a polite man. He didn't concern himself with social graces or being what we would now term as politically correct. He was wearing camel's hair, which is smelly, would not likely have his hair and beard combed and oiled. He'd look like a madman.

Add to that his declaration that everyone must come to be baptised, he'd be a sight to behold. And yet, because the faithful had heard of the Messenger to announce the Messiah, he was taken seriously. Many came and were baptised at the River Jordan. The same place where John baptised his cousin Jesus. It happened, in fact, at the end of the same chapter we are looking at today.

A question that is raised in many commentaries, and something I've wondered for awhile is "who baptised John." In fact, later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus comes to John to be baptised. Initially John refuses as he thinks he should be baptised by Jesus. Jesus says "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." (Matthew 3.15, NRSV)

This is where things get interesting...John was blessed by the angel Gabriel that he would be the one to announce the Messiah, Emmanuel, Jesus of Nazareth. John, as soon as he was old enough to live alone went out into the wilderness, never tasting strong drink or receiving a formal education. He learned and lived off the land and when the time was right, he came out of the wilderness, announcing the coming of Jesus.

He was the first to baptise and baptised many BEFORE he baptised Jesus.

John didn't need to be baptised because he was ordained from birth that his role was to announce the Messiah.

We do not read anywhere in scripture that John was baptised with water, yet that doesn't mean he wasn't.

In Jewish custom, to be cleansed from sin and to be able to return to the community, a man or woman would need to be immersed in water, something called mikvah, which

would allow them to return to community. It is very likely John would have partaken in mikvah before he began announcing Jesus coming. Thus he didn't need to be baptised. John didn't need to be cleansed from sin and accept Jesus as Messiah. He grew up KNOWING who Jesus was. Make sense?

We don't hear much again from John until he upsets Herodias and King Herod. John, as I said earlier, didn't worry so much about keeping the peace as he did about keeping the laws. It was unlawful for a man to take his brother's wife as his own, which is exactly what Herod did.

John spoke out, loudly and often, that what Herod and Herodias were doing was against the Mosaic laws of the time. Herodias vowed revenge upon John and after her daughter danced for Herod to celebrate his birthday, Herod vowed to give her anything she wanted, including half of his kingdom. She went to her mother and asked what she should do. Herodias said "the head of John the Baptist". Herodias the daughter asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Charming. And it was granted.

John didn't care about social graces or keeping the peace. John the Baptist was about living a morally upstanding life.

He knew his calling was to announce the Messiah, who also happened to be his cousin. He knew that people would be confused, thinking John to be the Messiah. So he was steadfast in his prophetic role as Messenger.

When we think of the word Peace, John is not likely the first image to come to mind. Yet his prophecy was to announce the Prince of Peace, the King of King and Lord of Lords. John the Baptist was born of extraordinary circumstances, lived a life according to God's calling and will. He responded to his calling by staying true to the lessons to which he had devoted his life.

His life was miraculous and his death was violent; also in parallel to his cousin Jesus.

As we walk through this second week of Advent, let us remember to live our lives with the fire and zest of John. Winter coats instead of camel's hair. And while I could get behind consumption of wild honey, I don't think a diet of locusts would work for me.

Let us pledge ourselves to living by John's example. To live a life of austerity, of devotion and of love. He may not have been polished or educated. Yet John lived a life to which God would have been proud. Well done, good and faithful servant. May we continue to live in love and work for peace.

Let all God's children say Amen.

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Isaiah 11.1-10 Psalm 72.1-7, 18-19
Romans 15.4-13 Matthew 3.1-12