

Happy Holidays from John the Baptist

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Matthew 3:1-12

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I have not had the opportunity to see all of your holiday Christmas cards or your Christmas designs and holiday themes in your home and around your hearth; I also do look forward to seeing the nativity scenes that are brought in from your homes that we will display in the library when the time comes. But I would wager that in all those corners and crevices and on your cards and in nativity creches, there will nary be a mention or display or reference to John the Baptist. I have not thoroughly read the script of our upcoming Christmas pageant, but I'll go out on a limb and say there is no John the Baptist part in the play. If John the Baptist were a t-shirt, it would read: 'Keep Advent Weird,' or maybe even 'Make Advent Weird Again,' also known as the MAWA movement. He's like the guy who is in our family but we are always on edge when he shows up for the Christmas gathering; or the friend from college who never quite could get over that we are no longer living in 1968 anymore; he's like the eccentric professor whose classes you enjoyed but who was impossible to follow so you gave up taking any notes; he's like the person who preached things or expressed things that sounded wild and far-fetched long ago, but now seem strangely prescient. He's like the guy who lives out on the Appalachian Trail who wears hemp and forages for his food and hasn't shaved since the Reagan Administration. And perhaps the most unsettling thing about John the Baptist that greets us every Advent is his conclusion at the end of our passage today: 'you think I'm weird and eccentric, wait til you see the one who is coming after me.'

Whatever lane of domesticated Christianity and sanitized Christmas we like driving in, John the Baptist takes the wheel, and we are out of our comfortable lane and off-road and into lanes we would prefer not to travel and on roads and going down paths and swerving into lanes we just as soon avoid if we could cut things down to size and have the Savior of our choosing. And just when we think we are going to have an anxiety attack or try to find an extra seat belt or grab the console and pray that we make it to our destination, John the Baptist turns to us hanging on for dear life in the passenger seat and we are yelling back watch where you are going, stop talking to us, stop looking over here, and nevertheless he never breaks eye contact and says, if you think I am wild and all over the place and unconventional and beyond your control and comfort, wait until Jesus takes the wheel. I don't think this is what Carrie Underwood envisioned when she sings, 'Jesus, take the wheel, take it from my hands, 'cause I can't do this on my own, I'm letting go, so give me one more chance and save me from this road I'm on, Jesus take the wheel.' I bet she didn't think asking Jesus to take the wheel might actually be more dangerous or wild or bumpy or disruptive than whatever fix or problem she was in, but I think that is what John the Baptist certainly intimates. Be careful praying for Jesus to take the wheel,

he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire, he'll separate the wheat from the chaff and burn it all up with unquenchable fire.' Was that the scripture tidings you used on your Christmas cards this year? Holiday greetings from John the Baptist: 'may your days be merry and light, and also filled with the Holy Spirit and fire. May you and your loved ones experience the winnowing fork and the threshing floor and be burned with unquenchable fire...oh, and have a Happy New Year!

Yeah...John the Baptist should be in the prime-time slot during Advent and Christmas but eggnog latte has a much bigger role than he does in the Christmas celebration. And rightly so, we can't let John the Baptist be the centerfold of our Advent preparations. He's too threatening. Too wild. Too much of a reminder that the coming Messiah is not here just to pat us on the head and tell us what a blessing we are, but whose coming may also threaten the ways we like to arrange our lives and whose existence may re-arrange what we thought was important, what we thought was everything, what we thought was at the center of the universe. If we think faith is the same thing as smooth stability, then John the Baptist needs to get moved off the stage, out of the pageant, and up into the attic as quickly as possible. If we think there is nothing radical or eccentric about what we are asked to believe, how we are called to live, or the community Jesus forms, then the easiest thing to do is to deep six John the Baptist. He spoils Advent and decks the halls a lot more eccentrically and more threateningly than our liking.

Other than his attire and upkeep, what about him grates on us and bothers us? Well, for starters, he calls us to prepare for Christ's coming not just by celebrating or decorating or chasing the Christmas spirit, but through repentance. By assessing the ways we fall short, by looking at the challenges facing those in desperate circumstances, by taking an inventory of our own practices, and admitting we need to change or there we things we are not doing or things we could do without or some barriers that we could help knock down so that more of our neighbors could thrive or there we things we could do better in our world than the status quo or a religion mainly worried about advancing self. So we don't like John challenging us to do and be better. But that's not all of it. We also don't like John because he is not impressed with our resumes. He is a puncturer of pretense. I'll quote him directly: 'do not presume to say for ourselves, 'we have Abraham as our ancestor,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.' The gospels are full of people with good resumes who think it is their merit that bestows upon them the favor of God rather than the grace of Jesus Christ. It's the people with nothing to lose, poor widows, tax collectors, prostitutes, parents with sick children, and people with physical ailments that know what it means to live out of their dependence upon God rather than their strength and strong resumes. The people who always have the hardest time reconciling with their place in God's kingdom are those who think they should be able to earn their way into it themselves. Lord, I fast twice a week, I give a tenth of my income. Lord, I have kept all the laws and commandments since my youth, what else do I have to do? Lord, what must I do to inherit the kingdom of heaven?

Ruby Turpin's vision in Flannery O'Connor's short story *Revelation* comes to mind...even at the end of the story when Ruby is gifted a divine beatific vision, this is what she sees as the vision transfixes in the setting of the sun. 'She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of blacks in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and (her husband) Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right.' In short, they had resumes, they had some merits and virtues and pretense. 'She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.'¹ Shocked and altered and even their virtues were burned away. That sounds like an Advent that not only includes John the Baptist, but one that turns him loose on us to prepare the way of the Lord.

John the Baptist greets us and orients us to a Savior who will fulfill our hopes and dreams and who will bring us comfort and joy, but just not the benign, cozy, stable way we thought he would come among us. John introduces us to a gospel and a way of discipleship that is not all that impressed with our list of accomplishments and our pedigree, but also a gospel and way of discipleship that is not all that embarrassed by our major mess-ups and blemishes. Just to prove to you that John the Baptist is not completely unsentimental and unsappy and some version of a Christmas wet blanket, in a way, I think you could compare him to the angel Clarence in the Christmas classic, 'It's a Wonderful Life.' He comes to prepare us, to remind us, to point us to the wild, unstable, and absurd notion, that we are our most human and fully alive, not when we are self-sufficient enough to live off our resumes and past glories and Abraham's pedigree, but when we are completely dependent upon, desperate even, for the grace and mercy of the whole cast of characters through whom Christ keeps company.

Wild and weird John the Baptist preaches to the gathered throngs to repent, the kingdom of heaven has come near. He prepares the way for the nearness of Christ to right sizes our lives by turning them upside down and undoing us by his way of life and his claim upon us, which will also transform us, heal us, and put us back together again whole. We cannot claim Abraham's pedigree as enough or believe that having the status of 'Christian' renders us self-sufficient. In fact, no matter how hard we try, no matter how much good we do, no matter how many experiences of the holy we enjoy, we will

¹ Flannery O'Connor, 'Revelation,' in *The Complete Stories*, 508.

never attain the status of Christian and be able to say, I have done a, b, c, so now I can be considered Christian, I have the right qualifications, now I have achieved the status of Christian, I know the right things, I feel the right things, I do the right things, now I am definitely a Christian. To quote John the Baptist: 'do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor,' or in theologian Karl Barth's words: 'one never is a Christian, one can only become one again and again: in the evening of each day somewhat ashamed about one's Christianity of the day just over and in the morning of each new day glad that one may dare to [become a Christian] all over again, doing so with solace, with one's fellow humanity, with everything. The Christian congregation is of one mind in that it consists of real beginners.' Advent means we begin again. We prepare for the unpreparable, we await those holy moments where we will unexpectedly need help, need community, and need the divine grace that swirls all around us. When we thought we had things under control, when we thought we were completely self-sufficient, when we thought we had built up some good social capital with God, we learn that the true meaning of our lives, our rightful place in the story, is not found in what we are able to accomplish but in our reliance on others and our dependence upon extraordinary grace. John the Baptist may not be on our holiday cards or in our Christmas pageants, but he prepares us for the One who is, by stripping us bare, by setting us free, by throwing us upon the mercy of others, even the one who comes into this world and into our lives as poor, vulnerable, and wholly dependent, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.