

Sunday, December 9, 2012
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Our brother, John the Baptist”

At a recent clergy gathering, we were asked to reflect on today’s passage.

We were given time to hear the words and then to silently think of what they said to us.

When asked to share our thoughts one of my colleagues said, “I have never been comfortable with John the Baptist being part of Advent.

He is such a contrast to the sweet baby Jesus.”

“What?!” I exclaimed. “I love John the Baptist.”

For me, John the Baptist represents all of the people who don’t follow the prescribed rules of life.

John is the cultural rebel who decides to dress differently than the other holy men.

John is the one who is willing to speak the truth to power – in the next sentence he calls those seeking baptism and repentance a “brood of vipers.”

He has lived into the calling that his father, Zechariah, described at his birth, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.”

John is perfectly comfortable in his role as the advance man.

He does not have any ego problems with being sent out to prepare the way for the Lord.

He knows what God sent him to do and he does it.

I like to think that John grew into the prophet he was with the careful guidance of his loving father.

The father’s proclamation at the birth of the son undoubtedly influenced John’s upbringing.

Zechariah was a priest described in an earlier passage as “righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.”

So John was brought up in a religious home where his ministry was nurtured.

Perhaps his wild behavior was a rebellion against his priestly father, but I prefer to characterize John’s uniqueness as the outcome of careful, loving rearing by Zechariah and Elizabeth.

I like to credit his parents with helping him grow into the man God created him to be.

I like to think of John the Baptist as genuine and true to himself and his calling.

One writer characterized the relationship between John and Zechariah as hero and master. He said: “The hero always learns from a master. At some point the master says to the young hero: ‘You have learned well, now you are ready to forge your own sword.’ Then comes the montage of blacksmith work: melting, hammering, melting and hammering again until the metal is just right. The master instructs the hero to remove every impurity so that the sword has no weakness. The refinement process is a test in patience and evidence of the hero’s progression towards a greater purpose.”

Malachi used this same metaphor to describe the changes that the promised savior will bring to the world.

He predicted that we would be subject to the refiner’s fire until we are pure and righteous and able to sit before the Lord.

The job of the metal refiner is seemingly light years away from our current lives.

However, biblical times metal refining was an incredibly meticulous and important task.

In order to create the best product the refiner would hold the precious metal over an extremely hot flame.

The refiner’s task was to sit, to wait and to hold the metal carefully, rotating it within the fire.

It was important for the refiner to hold the metal steadily and never look away because as soon as the refiner saw his reflection in the metal, he must immediately pull the metal out of the flame.

If the refiner held the metal in the fire too long, the metal would be ruined.

Malachi characterizes us as the metal with God as the refiner.

While the fire might be hot and difficult to bear God is holding us steadily and watching carefully, never looking away.

God, the refiner, holds us in the fire to guide us toward perfection.

He keeps his hand on us until his reflection can be seen and we are refined to our greatest strength.

Being a Christian means trusting God to shape us into a new creation.

It means undergoing a difficult process of refinement in which our impurities are slowly melted away as God molds something simple into something unique.

God is always working for restoration and transformation in our lives and in our world.

In order to open ourselves to this gracious work of God, we need to be willing to do the tough work of preparation.

Our hearts must be open to receive God’s word and our ears must be open to hear the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

We must be aware of the messengers who proclaim God’s coming.

We must be ready to hear from people as unlikely as a wild man dressed in camel's hair dunking people in the local river.

The messenger does not always look like we expect – just as the king – arriving as a baby – shatters all images and expectations.

Luke takes pains in his gospel writing to make this point.

He labors to place the story in historical context. His introduction to John's birth begins with "In the days of King Herod of Judea" and later, when John's ministry commences Luke tells us that it was "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah."

Against all these dignitaries stands unknown, insignificant John, son of Zechariah, emboldened and empowered by the Word of the Lord.

The word that fills valleys and levels mountains, that straightens out what is crooked and smooths over the rough places.

The word of the Lord, which builds a direct path by which God delivers love and mercy.

By the time Luke's community was reading these verses, the reign of these powerful leaders has passed, yet they are still telling the story of John and of Jesus, the one John heralds.

Luke tells these stories to remind us that events –small and insignificant as you can imagine, the birth of a son to a barren couple, the birth of a son to a young, single woman – deserve to be placed along side the world-shaking people and events of the day.

Luke reminds us that God is at work in the weak and small, the unexpected, the marginalized.

As I wrote these words I thought back to the Children's Show last spring about David and Goliath.

The Sunday school bulletin board upstairs still bears the banner, "Trust God to help you fight the giants."

Scripture reminds us once again that people at times feel overlooked, insignificant, and small, surrounded by insurmountable problems, people, and challenges.

Maybe it's not an Emperor that makes life miserable; maybe it's just a difficult colleague or unhappy marriage.

Maybe it's not a Roman governor that oppresses, but instead a struggle with addiction to alcohol or drugs.

Maybe it's not rulers that threaten to destroy, but instead feeling lost at school or work.

Maybe it's not high priests that overwhelm, but instead a struggle with depression, grief or loneliness.

Whatever it may be, Luke shares the gospel promise that these things, too, will pass; that in the end they will be but a difficult and distant memory; that over time they will become mere footnotes to a larger, grander, and more beautiful story of acceptance, grace, mercy, and life.

The waiting can be hard, the fire can be hot, the giants can seem insurmountable, but.....the voice crying out in the wilderness bids us to hold on, the kingdom is coming, the savior is near.

When my clergy group gathered at the end of our session my prayer was this: Oh God, we know we can't be Jesus – but grant us the grace to be John.