

Nov. 29, 2020 First Sunday of Advent. HOPE
“Awakening to the Lion’s Roar” Isaiah 40:1-5. Mark 1 1-8
First United Church of Arvada. Rev. Karin Kilpatric

“In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea.”

It is the beginning of Advent (not the season of St. John’s Tide which comes mid-summer) but the exact opposite time of year. Yet, scripture guides us once again back to this important Biblical figure. It is perplexing, why we find John’s baptism of Jesus highlighted on this Advent Sunday of Hope. As important as this baptism is, it seems, initially, to have little to do with the celebration of Christmas-- Jesus’ birth into the world. Perhaps an event in a later passage of Matthew’s Gospel can shed some light on John’s role in the story. There we find Jesus getting a message from John, who is now in his prison cell awaiting death. On receiving this news, Jesus describes to his listeners the profound character of this man who has fulfilled all that Jews of his day expect in one chosen for special service to God. Jesus refers to John as the messenger promised in Hebrew scripture who will be sent to “prepare the way.” Jesus suggests John’s prophetic nature and purpose and calls him, “Elijah.”

John was a hermit who lived alone in the desert. He abandoned all the comforts of community life. He foraged for food, wore rough clothing and was homeless. Unencumbered by the concerns of a personal life, he remained sensitive to the deeper truth of the world events surrounding him. The world was on the brink of everlasting change and John knew he was called to prophesy it. “Repent.” Prepare yourself for the redemption of the world that is coming. He called people to come toward Jesus whose message would fundamentally change their hearts and minds. This was a radical message, for John didn’t just tell them to return to a proper observation of the laws of Moses and follow these. They were not just to live out a proper ethics. They must change their hearts and minds if they were to hear the message that was coming. The future was on the brink of opening up to them.

Here, the words of Isaiah 40:3 come to mind as they surely did to John the Baptist who repeated them. “A voice cries out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” These words in Isaiah come out of the time of Judah’s exile and slavery in Babylonian 586-539, almost 600 years before the birth of Jesus. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah speak of God’s judgement of his people who have turned away and placed their trust in secular rulers. Now, beginning with chapter 40 vs. 1, God offers comfort to his people. In Hebrew, “na-hamu,” (used in this passage) means to comfort and console suffering. Isaiah offers real hope for their return to Jerusalem in the days ahead. He writes, “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, she has served her term and her penalty has been paid.” The Hebrew phrase, “make straight in the

desert a highway for our God” is interesting. You would think it would say that God would make a road for them, for their return from exile, but no, it is a directive for the people to prepare themselves with discipline, a rekindling of their tradition, and prayer, for their return-- to prepare a highway into their hearts which have been existing in a desert of despair. Those exiled almost 50 years before were mostly gone and a new generation born into slavery in a foreign land would be the ones to return.

John was a reactionary person. He didn't offer a carefully tender message (as Isaiah had to the Jews in exile) when he spoke to the Pharisees and Sadducees who approached him for baptism. He lashed out at them with vitriolic words like “You brood of vipers.” He was quite radical in every sense of the word. Even his baptisms were shocks to the human system—not gentle sprinklings of grace, but down-and-dirty dunking that took one's breath away and brought him or her to the panic point of drowning before lifting them up above the water, sputtering and gasping back to life and breath. Reborn.

The word, radical derives from the Indo-European word, “Ra” which means to derive or grow out of. “Ra” is also the origin of the word “root.” So, to be “radical” means to get back to your real roots. Radical does not mean to be anarchic or unruly or disorderly or rude but, rather, to find the root from which you come—to grow into the life you were meant to live. Interestingly, another familiar Old Testament passage from Isaiah, often read during this season and seen to point to the coming Christ, describes this root as well. “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him.”

Reactionary and Radical? Are you comfortable with those descriptions of John? John brings a message of hope, but it is not offered with comforting words. His purpose is clearly different. Poet Allen Tate says that “Reaction is the most radical of programs; it aims at cutting away the overgrowth and getting back to the root.” Again, a reference to returning to our roots. In “The Authentic Reactionary,” Nicolas Gomez Davila describes a reactionary person in an admiring way when he says, “The reactionary escapes the slavery of history because he pursues in the human wilderness the trace of divine footsteps.”

John sought in the wilderness this trace of the divine, which led him to the Jordan river on that fateful morning. When Jesus of Nazareth went down into the water, his soul made way for the being of the Christ to enter his human form. What an extraordinary thing, that John, a human being, was to become a birthing assistant at this cosmic spiritual event between the heavens and earth, in this transformational moment when God entered human form and Jesus' ministry could begin.

“The reactionary escapes the slavery of history because he pursues in the human wilderness the trace of divine footsteps.” A reactionary is not bound tightly to the ways of the world. He is not enslaved to its customs and values. He lives with a radical freedom to proclaim who he knows himself to be, what he knows the world to be, and where he senses God’s spirit to be. He can sound rather crazy and is frequently alienating to others or at the very least he can make them quite uncomfortable. He often discovers he must pay a big price for following “the trace of the divine” he uncovers in this material world. Imagine, if you can, who among us plays this role in our time. Who attempts to follow the trace of the divine and willingly pays the price? John the Baptist was never to emerge from prison, for he was beheaded by Herod, at the request of Salome, Herodias’ daughter, soon after. The dark forces that threatened the world of that time (and threaten our own) used even the beautiful and innocent dance of a young girl as a ploy to extract a promise from one with great power to destroy.

When John the Baptist called the people to repent, to change their hearts, he wasn’t saying they were evil or heartless but that their hearts needed to be awakened.

In the traditional lore of animal psychology, there is a belief that lion cubs are still-born, and that it is only the roar of the mother lioness that can awaken them into life. Her startling roar, which terrifies all around her in the desert, is necessary to bring her offspring to life. Isn’t that a wonderful image? What a lovely metaphor for the words and reactionary strength of a radical such as John the Baptist, crying out in the desert? We hear the lion roar, it is ferocious, but it brings life back to life.

Greg Mello, [a co-founder of the Los Alamos Study Group](#), in his March 2013 blog, speaks clearly to the matter of evil, which prophets, both ancient and modern, have cried out against. He says that evil,

“refers primarily to the anesthetized heart, the heart that has no reaction to what it faces, thereby turning the variegated sensuous face of the world into monotony, sameness, oneness (uniformity), the desert of modernity... The heart must be provoked, called forth... Beauty must be raged, or out-raged into life, for the lion’s cubs are still-born, like our lazy political compliance, our meat-eating stupor before the TV set.... What is passive, immobile, asleep in the heart creates a desert, which can only be cured by its own parenting principle that shows its awakening care by roaring. “The lion roars at the enraging desert,” wrote the poet Wallace Stevens...”

As alarming as it might be to be startled awake, how much more terrifying to be lulled to sleep-- to become numb, as we “sleep-walk” through the devastation of the planet, the destruction of democracy, the disregard of the illness and deaths (particularly of the old) during this pandemic, the violence against black and brown people, or the death of trust in the working of God’s spirit in our lives. We have become anesthetized by the distractions of consumerism and isolated egos willing to sell out everyone around them for their own comfort,

wealth and power. Despite the roar of the lion, the discomfoting words of our scripture, and the call of our baptism, many of us have only begun to wake up through witnessing the suffering and death of the pandemic in 2020 and the human belligerence perpetuating it.

Advent is a season of waiting. It is a time for preparing the heart for awakening to the deep joy of the birth of a saving spirit. What these traditions, rituals, words of scripture, songs and prayers can bring each of us in this time of rampant fear, heartache, anger and pain is an awakening of our hearts to a passionate and radically free way of living. For all my descriptive words today and your possible receptivity to them, can you sense the outrage of the prophets? Can you hear the lion roar? Can you feel the spirit rise up within you pulling you out of your mind and heart numbing bewilderment and fear into a courageous expression of your faith and into bold, compassionate action? Is there a way to make John's radical message shout out from our collective hearts as we begin a new Christian year? That is the hope of this first Sunday of advent. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

I will close with words from Bruno Barnhart, whose beautiful thoughts opened our time together, today, in our Call to Worship.

There is a secret in the heart of life.
that is not only
the unmoving white light.
It is not only
the still point of the turning world,
not only the light-filled
empty center.
It is also the lion and fire;
the unceasing explosion
of being, of
proliferating life,
from the center.
It is the fontal energy
that demands to express
itself everywhere
and through
every
form.