

Sermon Notes for the Second Sunday of Advent

The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

Church of Our Saviour, Mill Valley, California

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It's always in early Advent that we hear John the Baptist's cry, the powerful and cutting words of a prophet from the wilderness, from the edges of our civilized and well-maintained lives. John the Baptist is clearly Christian tradition's "wild man," living at the edge of civilization on locusts and wild honey, drawing to himself people who are seeking renewal of their lives. In this way, he is identified with Elijah, among the most heroic prophets of Hebrew scripture. Often, the gospels tell us, the people John draws are the marginalized of their society – tax collectors, soldiers, and others who are shunned for all kinds of reasons.

Why the Sadducees and Pharisees show up at the Jordan is harder to discern. John the Baptist calls them a "brood of vipers." They may be out to trap him, as they are often depicted later trying to trap Jesus. It is also not outside the realm of possibility that they, too, are out for renewal of their own spiritual lives. John the Baptist warns them against the trappings of their religiosity. First, he names their fear: "Who warned you about the wrath to come?" John the Baptist and his movement pose a threat to their established ways of being faithful, as will Jesus' teachings and the Spirit of fire he is bringing. Moreover, like many tangled up in their own self-righteousness, the Pharisees and Scribes peddle fear as part of their theology. John the Baptist tweaks their nose spiritually by calling this forth in them, and also more deeply demands that they show up at the Jordan not merely with their outward religiosity but with their genuine selves.

John goes one step further by naming their claims on heritage. It is not enough for them to declare their spiritual ancestry as justification before their God. They are asked to bear the fruits worthy of repentance, of *metanoia*, of transformation, not merely the mal-nourishing fruits of religiosity or poisonous self-righteousness. Nor can they rest on the laurels of their ancestor's righteousness, nor live in constant fear of taking a wrong step before their God in assiduous obedience to their ordinances and customs. Repentance, John is telling them, is about bearing good fruit for God's work in the world: good fruit like justice, compassion, healing, hope. And they, like we, are called to offer the fullness of their hearts to the coming of Christ, the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the fire that will change everything from top to bottom, even in the innermost depths of their souls.

This time of year, as we are caught up in a host of Christmas customs and traditions and as we also face challenges in the Holiday Season ranging from family conflict to confronting deep memory, John's call to us for repentance reminds us to keep our eye on what is truly spiritually important. In the midst of all our busy-ness and the temptation to fall into the depths of holiday memory; in the midst of our temptation to get caught up in the secular hype of the holiday seasons; we must cultivate in our hearts, lives, and relationships the justice and hope that welcomes God's grace, the work of the Spirit in our midst. We are asked to seek that grace that bears good fruit for all of our neighbors and the strangers and marginalized among us. This is the spiritual work of Advent, the response to the promise of God's

grace and impending reign, our invitation to participate in the in-breaking that Isaiah foretells about the new creation, the new Holy Mountain, where peace breaks out and life and justice are held up as the supreme values; where self ambitions and obsessions with our own rectitude are set aside for God's priorities of compassion and the fullness of life.

The promise at the Jordan, at the Holy Mountain, and in our own lives at this time of Advent, is that out of the stumps of our lives, just like the stump of Jesse, will grow up new life for us and all Creation. Christ is coming into our midst to remake us and everything else. John the Baptist reminds us that our most important task to open ourselves to that possibility by clearing the pathways of our hearts for his arrival.

In practical terms, that means our need to stop, empty, give, and listen – our supreme challenges, but also our most extraordinarily important task at this busy time of year.