

Matthew 3:1-12 Bill Uetracht 2 Advent 12.4.25

I think many of you know that my wife Bev and I have known each other the entirety of our lives. We grew up at the same church, Trinity Lutheran in Mt. Healthy, Ohio. She and I were in her great aunt Lily's preschool Sunday School class together. So, most of our memories, especially church memories, are shared ones.

One such shared memory involves the annual Christmas Eve pageant at Trinity in which Mr. Bauer made an appearance. Mr. Bauer—we didn't call him Eddie; that wouldn't have been polite—was a scruffy man who had been around the block a time or two, struggling for many years with alcoholism. He was always John the Baptist for the Christmas Eve pageant. In that role, Mr. Bauer donned a huge, unkempt beard, wore minimalistic clothing, probably something resembling a burlap sack, and yelled with a deep, scratchy bass voice as he came down the aisle in what was mostly darkness.

"Prepare the way of the Lord," he would scream, frightening a lot of people, especially kids. We knew this was serious stuff and that the arrival of Jesus was not just a matter of romantic sentimentality centered on a cute baby. No! Before we got to Jesus, we had to go through John, and John was no pushover, no reed shaking in the wind, no prophet dressed in a soft robe living in some royal, gold-saturated palace.

While Christmas belongs to Jesus, Advent belongs to the tough, hard, crusty, crabby, repentance-preoccupied John. Admittedly, not all view John in this way. The well-known movie and play, *Godspell*, has a different take on John. In *Godspell*, John is not so much a curmudgeon, but a court jester, a clown. He represents

what is in essence a comical alternative to business as usual, an alternative to the fancy, fussy temple, an alternative to religion shaped by power and money. In this view, John makes us laugh at the seriousness of a strangling, uptight political and religious establishment. He makes us say, “Really? We aren’t going to take you that seriously. So, I, John, will take my show on the road. I’ll head to the wilderness. I’ll do religious important stuff out there, not in the temple. I’ll be the phenomenally different one. Together, we will laugh at the establishment.”

I like the notion of John as the clown. I like seeing him as a caricature of himself, something that Dolly Parton has often said about her personae. Her overdoing it is what she has said draws people to her. John the Baptist overdoes it, so that he can get our attention. In many ways, he represents hyperbolic, exaggerated satire.

But these days, I am finding myself not satisfied with stopping there, with a John who simply is the clown. I don’t think I’m looking for a Mr. Bauer, for a figure who literally scares the hell out of me. But I have been wondering lately if sometimes these days we don’t work too hard to make Christianity all niceness.

I have been a leader who has seen grace and compassion as the primary focus of our faith. And I will continue to be such a leader, urging us to get beyond moralism and judgmentalism. But if I am going to take John and thus Advent seriously, I must move beyond a leadership that simply pats people on the head and tells them that everything is okay. To hear and receive John, I must be prepared for my little world, our little worlds to be challenged; I am going to need to see that something is wrong with the world and with

me. You don't need to repent if everything is okay. For John, not everything is okay. And admitting that is significant work for those who are preparing for the one who is to come, who is said to be more powerful than John.

I say all of this with the assumption that you know that repentance is not simply a matter of feeling sorry for what you or we have done. Biblical repentance, especially in the John-the-Baptist style is much more behaviorally focused. Whether you feel sorry or not is not the issue. The issue is whether you or we will behave differently, if we will move in a new direction, change what we've been up to. This is going to be a big theme this year as we deal with the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew, Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." For John and Matthew, performance matters. For them, repentance is performance based.

So, what kind of changes are being asked for by John the Baptist, his ministry, his person? We probably could provide a long list, and even with that list, not touch on the thing that would be appropriate for you. I will let you ponder how you personally need to change your performance, what behaviors need to be transformed in your lives. But I'll let John's person and work give us some suggestions. Bill Loader says that in John, the one preparing for Jesus, "we see the first breaking of the waves. They crash," he says, "against pretense and superiority."

There is no pretense to John. He is what he is. He doesn't need to wow you with his six-pack abs, his Maserati, his four post-graduate degrees, his command of the language, his fancy

McMansion. No, he comes at us stripped of all that stuff. He comes at us as a simple one who doesn't need all the trappings of life to make it meaningful and make him look good to others. The kind of performance that he is after is not the kind that the world is after and that he must think the Pharisees and Sadducees are seeking. They are coming out to see him only because they want to look good to others, he seems to be saying. Looking good is not the calling. In fact, the preoccupation with looking good may be the thing that keeps us from true health and from being of great service to others. We do our best work when we aren't pretending, when we are not running from reality, when we are not using all the stuff of life to cover up what often we are trying to escape—loneliness, shame, low self-worth, deep pain.

The waves begun by John the Baptist crash up against pretense, against all of our efforts to hide. And while they are doing that they crash up against superiority. For John, everyone needs to be dunked in the water. Don't think you can rely on your ethnic, racial, or national background to avoid the call to repentance. "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor.'" You aren't superior because of your family lineage, being from a certain group of people. Come on, Americans! It's a good thing to be American. But that status doesn't make you better than anybody else. Come on, white people. Come on, English-speaking people. Come on, rich people, formally educated people. Come on, Lutherans. Come on, Christians. Come on, all of us. The superiority gig has got to go. We're in this together. The call to repentance is for all of us. As Luther puts it, we're all beggars at the cross. We're all in

need of the grace and suffering love that are poured out from the cross of a dying man.

And, according to John, that need is a matter of urgency. Why? Well, listen to John. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Why repent? God’s way of doing things has arrived on the scene. Love, justice, mercy, forgiveness, and grace are here, just beyond our reach. God’s dream for the world is bursting on the scene. A whole new way of operating has drawn near--a way that sees the poor in spirit as blest, the meek as the ones who will inherit the earth, the peacemakers as the children of God. A whole new way of operating that envisions the wolf living with the lamb, the cow and the bear grazing together, the nursing child playing over the hole of the snake—that way is slipping into history. A whole new way of operating that involves loving enemies and not seeking revenge, is arriving in the person of Jesus.

And if that is what is coming, if that is what is here, then the same old same old won’t do. It’s time to turn around, time to repent, not because you are going to burn if you don’t, but because love and compassion are leading the way, because grace and forgiveness are the final truth, because the dream of God is of a people united and saturated with peace. To repent is to live in concert with what God is up to.

John the Baptist is no easy character. Advent is not all sweetness and honey. Maybe it was all right to be unsettled by Mr. Bauer. Preparing the way of the Lord probably should shake us up. God’s dream is on its way and in some ways has already arrived. It can’t be business as usual.