

The Second Sunday in Advent – 2019

Isaiah 11:1-10

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

Nobody cuddles up with John the Baptist. When I was in boot camp, the company commander was not a nice man. He was mean. He was highly demanding. He was a living terror for us recruits. For ten weeks we never escaped this man – eat, sleep (a very little sleep) and drill – the company commander was with us 24 hours a day. It wasn't his job to be nice. He was supremely devoted to his vocation – to take 100 raw recruits and hammer into them a military bearing.

We are very close to one of the world's most elite military bases, where warriors are trained. The Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, also known as 29 Palms, is the largest United States Marine Corps base. Drilling, enhanced drilling, is a way of life at 29 Palms. Why? Because life is precious – one needs to function well in a combat situation to accomplish the goal, to achieve the mission, to safeguard life – yours and your allies. Marine boot camp beats you down and forces you to rely on your fellow Marines. Boot camp teaches you not to think of yourself but of the company in order to protect life and craft an effective fighting force. If Pee Wee Herman was your company commander your outfit would be on a fast track to 100 caskets. If Richard Simmons was the boot camp drill sergeant then your outfit would be of no use to anybody.

John the Baptist was supremely devoted to his vocation. He was sent by God to prepare the way. Long had God planned to send His Son. The way was to be prepared and John the Baptist was the instrument through which God would prepare Israel to receive His Son aright. This is what the Gospel according to John says about the Baptist and the Lord Christ: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

Isaiah the prophet had announced the coming of this last, greatest, prophet. "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight.'" John had come. The voice was sounding in the wilderness of Judea, speaking with astonishing force: The kingdom of God is at hand. John was stern. No one snuggles up with John the Baptist – he puts you on edge. He puts you on edge to prepare the way. John is not nice; he is wild; his appearance is alarming, his words are alarming. "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." Judgment. God's judgment approaches and good fruit is what He expects. The axe of finality is laid to the roots and there will be no negotiations with the axe. Fire awaits those who reject God's kingdom, who reject God's Christ, who refuse to repent.

As his name suggests, John was baptizing people, baptizing sinners, baptizing those who wanted cleansing, who confessed their sins and were eager to receive what baptism provided. John's alarming voice stirred people, it awakened them from their spiritual complacency. John's voice and his call to repentance had the tone, the mark of authenticity. Those who heard his preaching

recognized the authority in his voice – and it was not his own authority, but God’s. Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand. When someone calls a Christian to repent it should not take long for the individual to find something that needs changing in their life. You and I, we know ourselves; we know what lurks in our hearts, what behaviors we indulge in that are diametrically opposed to God’s law, to God’s holiness, to our own faith. Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand. It was so true. The Lord Jesus was about to begin His ministry. All of God’s preparatory work was about to end for Jesus was at hand. The time could not have been riper for Israel to wake up.

I watched in mystified amazement.

My daughter had hair like gold. She was a preschooler; maybe four years old, and Alise was braiding her hair. All ten fingers were moving with skill, alacrity, purpose. A weave, three strands being interlocked – this way and that – transforming a really cute kid into a picture-perfect beauty. I watched in mystified amazement. As a dad, there were certain rituals, certain feminine secrets to which I was not privy. Braiding hair was one of them. There was the normal, but still fantastic, old-fashioned braid. There was the dueling braids that ran from the temples, around the head and down the back. And there was my favorite, the French braid.

Three strands – in order to make the braid look fabulous you have to keep track of all three strands. Holding and positioning two of them while you move the third around, always anticipating the next move, switching strands between right and left hands. It is not in most men’s repertoire – we know how to spit, and swing an axe, and we can teach our sons how to shave their faces but most of us can’t braid hair. Advent is heaven’s braid. Three strands of equal and majestic importance are woven together during this season. You are called to marvel at their beauty, their symmetry, their orchestrated union. Advent doesn’t create reality. Advent reveals reality, divine reality and your incorporation into what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will do. During Advent you can move from one to the other and back to a third. God braids them together.

The nature of this season is to highlight the braid of three strands which is constantly wrapped around us. The first strand is that Advent focuses on what has occurred historically – Jesus’ conception and birth, His incarnation, His first advent. The second strand of Advent is that this same Lord will return on the Last Day – we prepare for that day, we anticipate that day, and stir ourselves to be ready when He returns. The third strand is that the Living Lord comes to us now, through the Word and the Sacraments, and that it is our privilege to welcome Him now, welcome Him joyfully, welcome Him with a receptive spirit, gladly receiving His grace, His forgiveness, His love, His life. John helps us in all this. He still is not nice. We will not cuddle up with John. Whoever attempts to domesticate John does not understand either the Lord’s prophet or the gravity of our situation.

That last day approaches. It is a day of judgment. “His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.” That message still bears the mark of authenticity. You know this is true. The Holy Spirit reveals the veracity of this word and our hearts are stirred. God is at work, here, among us, using the Baptist as our company commander that we should be in fighting trim.

Prepare. Prepare the Way; make straight His paths. If any of us refuse to repent we endanger our lives. Advent is boot camp. John breaks down our pride, our spiritual sloth, our faithless indifference and our loveless hearts – our Lord approaches; He is looking for good fruit.

John's preaching can be distilled to two transcendent phrases. This stereo of divine revelation is the rhythm of our lives, it is the prophetic air in the lungs of our faith. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." John prepares the way. Christ is the Way. John ever and always points us to Christ. In Him we find Life. In Jesus's sacrifice on the holy cross, the kingdom of heaven came ploughing through this world. His life courses through your veins. His Word animates your heart, His body and blood infuse you with the fertility of Easter, the joy of all things good. Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away your sin, who feeds you with holy food, who took the winnowing fork of judgment upon Himself so that you might be gathered into the storehouse of heaven. Staying close to John the Baptist makes it impossible for you to miss the Lamb of God.

John is not nice but he is not supposed to be. John is not someone we will ever cuddle up to but he is so, so valuable to us. He calls us to repentance. He leads us to Christ. He prepares the way. Today our ears are full of the sound of his voice and we are blessed. The Lord approaches and we are well prepared to greet Him – to greet the Son of David, the Lord of heaven and earth, to greet Christ the King.