

“The Axe at the Root of the Tree”

Matt. 3:1-12, Advent 2-A, Dec 4, 2016

As much as most of us would probably never have wanted to trade careers with John the Baptist; there is at least one aspect of his job that some people believe they might have enjoyed—at least occasionally! And this was the privilege John the Baptist had of **pronouncing God’s judgment upon people deserving of it!**

We’ve all those times haven’t we, especially when we were younger, when we just wanted to stand up and tell it like it was! But as we grew older—it was the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit that brought to our attention with ever greater frequency that great insight of the Apostle James: **“Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry; for human anger, does not accomplish God’s holy and righteous purposes” (James 1:19-20)!**

But let’s be clear: John the Baptist was not speaking the judgment of God upon human sin **because he was angry**, but much more so because he was **filled with the divine compassion of God**. And in speaking God’s judgment upon human sin, **he never saw himself** as one to be excluded from that category.

He was a humble man—though straightforward!

- He summed up the whole reason for his existence in this world as that of simply being a **VOICE**—though his was a very important voice—the voice of which **Isaiah** foretold: **“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord—make straight path for him!’”**
- **With respect to the ONE whose way he was preparing**—he said **he was not even worthy** to untie his shoe strings, or unbuckle his sandals, or maybe even to carry his sandals as the **ESV** translates this verse for us here (v. 11).
- John was willing to call the people all around him to **“repent of their sins”** because he was privy to some very important information that others still did not have—and this was his joyful proclamation that: **“The kingdom of heaven was at hand,”** or as the New Revised Standard Version translates it perhaps even more accurately: **“The kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 3:1)!**

This season of the Church year more than any other points out to us the tremendous gap that often exists between our inner lives and our external behavior. And it’s especially during this time of year—at such events as the annual **Company Christmas Party**—that many coworkers will do their best to appear **cheery, smiling and laughing on the outside**, while **inside of themselves they are groaning in loneliness and pain.**

The constant images of the **“Happy Family”** and the **“Perfect Christmas”** become standards that announce their unspoken judgment upon all our failed relationships and our own inability to make things right!

- Another compelling feature that St. Matthew calls to our attention is the **extremely strange wardrobe** that John the Baptist’s was sporting—a single trade mark of his ministry: **“Camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist!”** This outfit far from being simply John the Baptist’s own expression of his eccentricity – provided a very powerful connection between him and the Prophet Elijah—who was also described in **2 Kings 1:8** as being a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist.
- In Matthew 11—Jesus himself declares John the Baptist to be the “Elijah” of which the Prophet Malachi had foretold: *“Behold I will send to you Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord” (Malachi 4:5)!*
- Moreover, John’s diet of—**“locusts and wild honey”** was also a sign of his personal devotion to God Word, since the Levitical law forbade good Jews to eat most winged insects, locusts and grasshoppers were considered to be kosher food.

Brothers and sisters, **while John the Baptist must have been extremely grateful to God that people from “Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan River were going out to him, to be baptized by him, confessing their sins”**—there was one traveling party that ended up out there on the banks of the River Jordan one day whose initial coming did not really seem to please him at all: The religious leaders from Jerusalem—the Pharisees and the Sadducees—who were more motivated, it seems, by their own curiosity to be there—than they were by anything else!

John, like St. Paul some years later, was reminding even these religious leaders that: *“We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23)!*

What some people who are **Christians never realize** is that the **Old Testament community of believers practiced a rite of Baptism too**—but it was not a Baptism to be offered to the Hebrew people themselves, who were **considered shoe-ins for heaven based on their circumcision** and the fact that they were the **direct descendants from Abraham**, but only to those who were becoming Gentile proselytes to the Jewish faith. Therefore, these men were deeply insulted, initially, that John would invite to also to confess their sins and to step into the Jordan River to be baptized!

BUT WHAT JOHN THE BAPTIST DOES NEXT FOLLOWING HIS TIRADE AGAINST THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS WHOM HE HOPED INITIALLY WERE COMING FOR BAPTISM IS ABSOLUTELY ASTOUNDING—AND NO DOUBT SPIRIT-DRIVEN.

All of a sudden, John the Baptist stops wagging his finger at them, and instead points them all away from their sinfulness and their personal need for genuine repentance, and points them all to the ONE who is coming AFTER

HIM. Now John the Baptist points all of them beyond his own preaching to the horizon where the SON (S-O-N) is beginning to rise.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire! His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:11-12)!

Preaching judgment is the easy part! What’s really most important, however, is saving the world! What John points to is the GOD WHO IS NOT WILLING TO STAND BY AND SIMPLY WAG HIS FINGER OF JUDGMENT AND EVENTUALLY TOSSING ALL THE UNRIGHTEOUS PEOPLE OF THIS WORLD INTO AN UNQUENCHABLE FIRE.

The One John points us to is a God who is willing to enter the burning chaos of human life and save it. John can now only talk about those things that stand in the way of our faithful living. He blusters, at times! He yells, occasionally! He spews out his judgment, but he remains in the wilderness, far away from the lives of those people who are streaming to him!

JESUS ON THE OTHER HAND, IS THE ONE WHO ENTERED OUR WORLD TO CONQUER SIN, DEATH AND THE GRAVE, SO THAT HE HIMSELF MIGHT EVENTUALLY ENTER INTO OUR HUMAN HEARTS. JESUS IS THE ONE WHO AT AN ENORMOUS COST TO HIMSELF – WILL TAKE INTO HIMSELF ALL THOSE THINGS THAT HAD FORMERLY SEPARATED US FROM GOD!

Christ’s work ends not in self-righteous satisfaction at letting all of us who are by nature sinners—really have it. Jesus’ work ends at the cross where the power of sin, separation and self-righteousness is totally burned off like the morning sun absorbing all the morning dew. On Easter morning, what we sinners get will be nothing less than his own ongoing life. They may indeed be worthy of judgment but what they get is new life!

Here, as in many other places in the Bible—John the Baptist is comparing our human lives—TO BE LIKE TREES. If we think of ourselves, SEPARATED FROM GOD BECAUSE OF OUR SINS—AS BEING LIKE TREES THAT CAN ONLY PRODUCE LOUSY FRUIT—then the CROSS OF CALVARY ITSELF—CAN BECOME FOR US, BY THE GRACE OF GOD, THE AXE AT THE ROOT OF OUR TREES BRINGING TO US THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS, LIFE AND ETERNAL SALVATION.

In other words, the AXE that is often times an instrument of death...can become for us also...an instrument of life; just like the cross itself was always before Jesus an instrument of death—can also become for us now an instrument of life!

There is a similar kind of argument that Paul presents to us concerning the waters of our Baptism in Romans 6: Baptism that initially can drown the old Adam in us, becomes also become the liberating means by which God raises us up out of that water filled with new life.

And if you think I am stretching this analogy just a bit too far, then let me remind you of that great prophecy of Isaiah—who foretells the coming of the Promised Messiah to US IN OUR OLD TESTAMENT LESSON TODAY (Isaiah 11:1-10)—TO BEGIN AS A TINY LITTLE SHOOT SPRINGING UP FROM THE STUMP OF A TREE, THAT FOR ALL PRACTICAL PURPOSES SEEMED TO BE DEAD AS A DOOR

NAIL—BUT INSTEAD WAS FILLED WITH NOTHING LESS THAN THE ABUNDANT LIFE OF GOD!

Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in our Old Testament lesson today. ***“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit!”*** In Job 14:7 we read, “For there is hope in a tree! If it is cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease!”

That tree of life, that new tender shoot out of the stump of Jesse, came to its fullest expression, however, in both a wonderful and terrible way—on a tree of death. The life of the Second Adam, the only other Man besides Adam who was sinless when he walked this earth, came to its fullest fruition on a different tree—the cross of Calvary. That terrible tree became the death of God and the life of humankind. Thus we celebrate the birth of Christ—by pondering the glory of it all as we look intently at our beautifully lighted Christmas trees---even while we remember that it will also be a tree that will serve to crucify him.

Let me close by sharing with you a little legend that was once told about three talking trees who could talk among themselves, who often talked about their dreams for the future.

The first tree said that it would like to be made into a cradle, so that I might go on living as a support for the new fragile life of a baby.

The second tree wanted to be made into an ocean-going ship so that it might go on living by carryings important cargo and constantly seeing new lands.

The third tree longed to stay right where it was, existing only as a tree, but growing ever taller and pointing ever higher to remind everyone that there was a God in heaven who loved them all.

But soon there came woodcutters who cut down these trees and in doing so slashed all their dreams.

The first tree was not made into a cradle, but was fashioned into a feeding trough, a manger for animals. But this manger was sold to a family in Bethlehem, and on the night that Jesus was born, this simple feed box became the cradle of the newborn Baby Jesus.

The second tree was built into a water vessel alright, but not as part of an ocean liner, but was fashioned into a relatively small, by comparison, fishing boat. But a man named Simon Peter bought the boat, and on one warm afternoon when the crowds pressed in, Jesus climbed aboard this small craft that was put out some 25 feet from the shore, so that the great number of people present, who were sitting on the hillside could now hear and cling to his every word.

The third tree was not only deprived of its dream to remain standing, but its wood was fashioned into a horrible instrument of torture and death, Calvary's cross. But it was on this cross that Jesus was crucified, transforming that ancient symbol of torture and cruelty into an eternal reminder of God's eternal love for all of us.

If the axe that John spoke of at the root of a tree was to remind us of the urgency of the present hour and was to be an ever-present reminder of us to repent

of our sins, the cross upon which our Savior died became the tree of life offering the forgiveness of sins, new life and salvation to all. Amen