

Richmond Hill
Richmond, Virginia
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2 Advent
Mathew 3:1-12
John the Baptist
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View from the Wilderness

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Tonight's Gospel is the preaching of John the Baptist. All four Gospel writers -- Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John -- seem to think that John the Baptist was extremely important to the message of Jesus. I don't know if any of them had experienced the original transition from the baptism, preaching, and teaching of John into the public ministry of Jesus, or if they were just reflecting what they had been told by others after they themselves met Jesus in the spirit and got into the Christian movement.

Whichever it was, I think we can assume that it was not just the historical experience with John the Baptist which these early Christians thought was important, but something more: there was something in the work which John the Baptist did with folks which made the words and ministry of Jesus ring with a greater clarity -- something in John's preparatory work made the path of Gospel straight.

We have here the familiar trio of overlapping realities in Christian teaching: The sequence of historical events in the actual lifetime of Jesus and his contemporaries is reproduced in the sequence of reading and storytelling in the Christian year, and these sequences are invited to be reproduced in the process of inner spiritual development which each of us seeks to follow as we grow in faith.

Tonight's story of John the Baptist we are going to call, for purposes of our own study, "The View from the Wilderness." To explore the view from the wilderness we are going to ask four questions:

1. What can you see in the wilderness? [that you can't see in your normal context?]
2. What does repentance look like?
3. How do you go beyond entitlement?
4. What can you do for preparation?

1. What can you see in the wilderness? [that you can't see in your normal context?]

The wilderness is a place where there is only nature – what was given – and a pretty barren vision of nature. Wherever we are carries a spirit and affects our deep mood. The wilderness is a place which evokes our inner emptiness and barrenness. If we feel inside what we see outside, there is emptiness in the wilderness. And therefore there is simplicity as well. The wilderness is where we perceive the simple, ultimate choices – life and death, hope and despair, light and dark.

The wilderness is a stopping place. Time stands still for a moment, but not in a way which is generous. Time stands still in all its starkness, like sand moving through an hourglass. Like a shadow moving across the face of a sundial, time is exposed in its inexorability. This much is gone. This much may remain.

The wilderness is a place to tell the truth. Outside the business, the relationships, the various narratives and organizations and schedules which make up our lives, the wilderness is where we count what really has been worth it, how we really are spending our time, how we really feel, where we really want to go. Lots of data – but simple sums.

When you go out there to the Jordan River on a weekend, outside the city, without your context, by yourself or with someone who also wants to be by themselves, -- when you leave the comfort, supports and responsibilities behind, when you stop in the timeless moment in a place where there is nothing but the most rudimentary beauty, -- from that point of view you get a reading on what really matters and what does not matter in your life. No matter how often you do it, it can be a pretty humbling and emptying experience.

I am, of course, describing an inner experience in terms of an outward experience. The outward experience helps – we shouldn't be naïve about that. But it is the inward experience that we are describing: the experience of the wilderness.

What can you see in the wilderness that you can't see in your normal context? Simple truth, simple choices, hope and despair, a stopping place, time itself. You can enter a time of repentance.

2. What does repentance look like?

The experience of wilderness is inevitably an experience of contrast. That is, when we drop down to the wilderness in our spirits, when we find the inner desert, when we come to the place of truth, the place where hope and despair reside, -- when we come

to the place where we see the specific passage of time in comparison to our own understanding of purpose, -- and when we see ourselves in relationship to the call of God -- when we come to that place, we are in a moment of contrast.

What we saw before we came is almost certainly not what we see now. An evaluation is taking place. There is awareness. There will be regret, there will be questions. This point is called “sobriety,” -- and yet, it does not simply have to do with freedom from chemicals which can cloud one’s brain, deceive one’s intelligence, and sustain denial of truths which lie before and within you. Sobriety is inner awareness, -- free from raucous and rampant likes and dislikes, emotions, and fears. It is a place of sober evaluation, where false hopes can be abandoned and realistic judgements are made.

The Greek word translated “repentance,” -- metanoia -- means to change one’s mind, one’s entire seeing and feeling -- one’s full outlook. It does not strictly mean to be sorry for what one has done wrong and commit to go back on the right way, although such an evaluation is bound to take place when one finds the right track after having been somewhere off it. Repentance is something like what T. S. Eliot describes as coming back to where you started and seeing it clearly for the first time.

In this sense, true repentance only takes place in the wilderness experience. The little “I’m sorry’s” and mid-course corrections of every day are certainly a part of the general theme, but when we come to the view from the wilderness, we are talking about a serious reorientation -- one that can even take place every day, at least in part. The busyness of our lives spins us out, and webs us in, and entangles us in the confusions of the day. We lose ourselves. The wilderness sobriety calms us, and directs us.

Richmond Hill and Benedictine spirituality, are in the repentance business. People come here to find the wilderness. We stop three times a day whatever is going on to visit the wilderness. Repentance is the renewing of our minds. It is the exact opposite of entitlement. The view from the wilderness has nothing to do with entitlement.

3. How do you go beyond entitlement?

Out there in the wilderness, beside the Jordan river, standing in the water, everybody was the same. Names and positions didn’t matter. Even religion, religious office, religious denomination, and religious history didn’t matter. Everybody was the same. Everybody was nobody. Everybody was somebody.

The view from the wilderness is always a view beyond entitlement. That means it is always a view oriented toward the future. What’s the problem of entitlement? You can hear it in the description of John’s encounter with the Pharisees: “Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.”

Entitlement looks for its affirmation on name, position or past accomplishment. It is all about self-justification, all about saying why one is all right and needn’t look at the stark realities of life.

But the view from the wilderness is a realistic view. It tells the truth about not only qualifications but accomplishment. I don't care if you call yourself a Christian; tell me if you're acting like one. I don't care if you don't have the right to do something to remedy that situation; tell me if you're doing something anyway. One of the most effective forms of entitlement is guilt, or a perpetual poor self-image: that's one of the ways we really don't have to get on with life. I don't care if you feel guilty; tell me what you are doing to make things better.

Out in the wilderness by the river; there in the wilderness in our souls – right there, there is no entitlement. It is all the present, all now, all what is next. The view from the wilderness takes us beyond entitlement.

4. What can you do for preparation?

The reason that the early Christians repeated this story of John the Baptist was for preparation – spiritual preparation for the healing and the forgiveness and the energy and the love and the grace of Christ. I am assuming there is a reason for their repeating of this story. We cannot grab Christ. We cannot make God speak to us. We cannot ourselves compel Jesus to be born in our hearts. But we can do something, -- and I think that is probably why none of the Gospel writers omitted John the Baptist.

We can go out to the wilderness. In the Christian year, if you take your cues from the Advent readings, this is what we are invited to do. The lessons from the Hebrew scriptures are stark and ultimate – describing God's basic judgement and his intentions for human society. The epistle and Gospel readings are apocalyptic, talking about judgement, about end-times, about the way things ultimately are and will be. These are wilderness readings, sobriety readings, repentance and re-evaluation readings. All of these are preparations for the new birth of Christ in us.

It's a spiritual sequence, preserved by the calendar of the Christian year, paralleling the calendar of the Northern Hemisphere. As the world comes to its darkest, quietest point, so we are encouraged to come to that point as well, to re-calibrate, to re-evaluate. We celebrate a new year with a new birth of Jesus – the redeemed and renewed image of God in the very core of the being of each of us. We prepare resolutions for the new year, so that we may indeed bear fruit that reflects the awareness to which God has brought us at this time in our lives.

Advent and the Christmas season should provide each of us at least one such time in the wilderness before the New Year begins. Pray that your time in the wilderness is not simply one created by the disappointment and heartache of failed celebrations. Rather, let it be deliberate, intentional, sober. Prepare in the desert of your soul a highway for our God. The view from the wilderness is, after all, our greatest act of hope, our greatest act of faith. It is all we can do. The rest is purely the gift of God to us.

AMEN.

