

## **“There Is Something about John”**

(Luke 3)

Along the pathway to Bethlehem, there are certain moments that are sign-posts and signal to my soul that I am inching closer to the stable where sacred love lights up the night sky. One such stop is hearing the gleeful oohs and ahhs that twinkling lights elicit from the backseat where Ethan and Olivia sit as we drive through town. Another marker on the road is the lingering ink smudges I notice as I massage my fingers after writing out our Christmas cards. And perhaps one of my favorite roadside clues is watching as red and green sprinkles pile onto an unsuspecting sugar cookie and countertop and floor like some kind of colorful blizzard went through out kitchen; like father, like kids. Resting within us all is an internal compass navigating us and guiding us toward Bethlehem. And for some reason, no advent season is complete for me without our annual foray into the wilderness to listen to John the Baptizer shouting out, “Prepare the way.” Now to be honest, I find myself treating John like an eccentric second cousin twice removed who shows up for family gatherings dressed from head to toe in plaid and bearing gifts of fruitcake for all. He is that type-casted lovable curmudgeon who we cautiously engage for one Sunday before retreating to a safer distance. When we leave the wilderness, walk out the church doors today into the second full week of Advent, there is almost this sense of relief if we exit unscathed from John’s overly serious, somber tone.

To be sure words like ‘repent’ sound dissonant to the otherwise harmonious melody of carols we are so used to this time of year. And so what is it about John that for me it just would not feel like Advent without pulling off on the side of the road that leads to Bethlehem so as to linger for a few minutes listening to his emphatic plea for us to prepare the way. Perhaps it’s just tradition; like stopping by the Whippy Dip for ice cream every time we are in Decorah, visiting Luther College. Our visit with John in the wilderness can be done on Advent autopilot; the wilderness is like passing a familiar landmark on a road we could drive in our sleep, telling us we are about halfway to the stable. Yet, I think there is something about John that is more compelling than tradition. Perhaps I am drawn in by his style that seems so radically different than my own. I mean there are folks who I’d certainly classify in the category of “brood of vipers”, but to say it to their face, my Midwestern, just be nice mentality couldn’t possibly muster such harsh words. While I do admire his honesty and forthrightness, it can be easy to forget that John’s words and actions and advice would eventually cost him his life.

Perhaps what keeps me coming back to the wilderness year after year is the fact that John was the one who offers us the grace of baptism and challenge of repentance. The act of baptism reminds us that we are claimed by God as beloved. The act of baptism celebrates our on-going, unfolding relationship with the sacred. The act of baptism is a seal upon our foreheads that drenches our hearts and soaks our souls with an invitation to live out our faith. Yet, baptism much like Christmas can become overly sentimentalized. Baptism, much like the one who first invited people to wade in the water, has the power to challenge us. Indeed, baptism has the power to change us; which is really what it means to repent. To change, to turn away from those places that

cut us off from God, from others, from that calling that restlessly sits within us. Repentance, like waiting, carries more baggage than a family of five going on a ski trip. Trying to untangle the word repentance from the guilt that word seems so easily to awaken feels like I am staring a twisted strand of Christmas light tightly wrapped in a ball. We've so intertwined repenting and feeling bad about places where we feel distant from God or actions that distract us from noticing the sacred, that we become almost powerless to make any kind of lasting change.

Part of the problem comes from seeing change as leaving something behind, too often change means we are staring in the rearview mirror. But, the truth is that change is also about intentionally turning toward a place that offers light and love and hope and peace. This fall there was this nagging restlessness within me that would not leave me alone no matter how much I tried to do. And then, as Advent approached, the proverbial light bulb went on in my head. I realized I had somewhere lost my morning prayer time. My good intentions of dropping Ethan off at school and then spending a few peaceful moments listening for God had been filled with checking emails, shuffling papers, and looking busy. I needed to repent; to turn away from that which distracted me and turn towards that which offered nourishment and stirred my soul. Friends, part of what so appeals to me about John as I listen to him preach is the reminder that repentance can be re-discovering and reclaiming that which brings us closer to God. But it is not just about us individuals. Repentance breaks through our personal bubble and opens our hearts to the world.

What truly stays with me as I start to leave the wilderness, the words of John that linger in my heart as I start up the embankment to get back on the road to the manger is his practical advice about what it means to prepare the way. Three times, three very different groups come to John after listening to his call to repent and ask, 'what should we do!?' That is the most basic, most heartfelt question of our faith, isn't it? What should we do? It is the kind of question that keeps us up at night, tossing and turning and staring at the darkened ceiling. What should we do is the kind of question that we wrestle with as individuals and as a church. What stays with me this Advent as I prepare to leave this wilderness is how straight-forward; almost simple John's answers are. What should we do, asks the crowd; give someone who does not have a coat one, John replies. What should we do, ask the tax collectors; be honest, John answers. What should we do, ask the soldiers; practice right relationships, John suggests. Sometimes we can complicate church and living our faith. At the heart of the question, what should we do, John offers us still to this day the most faithful and honest answer. We are reminded this morning that often God's presence is as near as our neighbor; working in God's creation is as close as walking out our door; sharing hope and peace comes from engaging those who brush up against our lives each day.

This morning, before we get back on the road to Bethlehem; before the blur that is the month called December resumes; before we hurry off toward Christmas, I want to encourage us to practice prayerfully preparing the way by being still, listening for, and anticipating the moments when we will encounter Emmanuel, God with us. If you would find that word that you sat with for a moment at the beginning of service. And I invite

you to let the word on the post-it note linger just a bit longer. I invite all of us away from the cacophony of sounds into silence. I invite us away from endless to-do lists to simply be for a few moments this morning. Friends, let us settle into a moment of silence this morning that cuts through and speaks to our hearts and helps us prepare the way for and be aware of the One who is Emmanuel, God with us.