

A Voice Crying in the Wilderness

In the name of him who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire, dear friends in Christ: The Advent season is about preparedness. It's about getting ready to receive and to welcome the Lord Jesus Christ – on one hand by looking back in remembrance of how he came to this earth and revealed himself as the lowly infant laid in a Bethlehem stable, and on the other hand and at this point for us far more urgently, looking ahead to that day he will reveal himself in heavenly splendor when he comes to judge the earth. Advent is about getting ourselves ready and keeping ourselves that way for both.

To help us in this regard, last week we heard from St. Paul who told us that it's time to wake up, to shake ourselves free from our spiritual complacency, from our plodding along in the sinful status quo of our lives. "Wake up", he said. "Cast off the deeds of darkness. Put on the armor of light. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ." As an illustration I compared Paul's warning to us as an alarm clock set to wake us up and to keep us from oversleeping.

This week hearing from John the Baptizer we double down on the theme, greatly amplifying it. If Paul's warning is like the sound of an alarm clock going off, then John is the drill sergeant who wakes you up by violently turning your mattress over hurling your body to the floor, or alternately to waking you by squirting lighter fluid on your feet and setting them ablaze. There is nothing gentle or subtle about John. There's no hitting the snooze button on him. He's quickly got you up and on your feet, your eyes open wide in shock and awe.

What he demands of you is nothing short of a radical reordering of your life. He interrupts your regular religious routine and calls upon you to make *real* changes. This is why we don't hear him preaching in the temple or in the synagogues, the places where the faithful normally gather to learn God's Word. No, to hear John you've got to get off your padded pew, leave the comforts of hearth and home, descend from the breezy Judean heights some four thousand feet in altitude, to what is quite literally the lowest land on earth: the gritty, blistering hot, sun scorched desert of Judea.

John has chosen for his pulpit one place in particular. It's a special spot on the Jordan River, which (most of the year anyway) winds lazily through the desert wasteland on its way to the Dead Sea. This is the precise place where some 1500 years earlier that Israel crossed over the Jordan into the Promised Land after their 40 years of wandering in the desert. At that time the river was at flood stage. To step into the water then would have meant being swept away and drowned. But recall what happened: when the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant stepped into the raging torrent, the water stopped flowing. It held back like when Moses parted the Red Sea. And Israel crossed over into Canaan on dry ground. The Lord made the way for them safe. And to serve as a monument marking the event, twelve stones were set up to represent the twelve tribes of Israel that crossed over that day into the land that the Lord had promised to their forefathers.

There are a number of reasons John has chosen this place. He preaches a baptism of repentance, which involves a thorough recognition and acknowledgement of the guilt of your sins; true contrition, that is, sorrow for having offended God and for hurting rather than serving the people in your life; and finally the genuine desire to change and to do better in the future. By going into the water with John here where God's people first entered the Promised Land, you

are admitting that you haven't be living as one of God's chosen people, that you deserve to be cast back out into the wilderness where all those who were faithless perished having fallen short of the goal; but that you want to be given a new start, a new beginning; the old you dead and buried in the water with all your sins, the new you emerging to live as a child of God in the Promised Land.

John himself is a living picture of the repentance he urges people to. He has observed the ascetic oath of the Nazarite his entire life. It means no razor has ever touched his head; his hair has never been cut or trimmed. It makes him look like a wild man. It further means that God's gift of wine given to gladden the heart of man has never touched his lips, nor has any other strong drink. He refuses to engage in such frivolity and merry making. No, he's all about fasting and praying like one in misery over his sinfulness, in constant mourning over the state of his dark soul. What little he does eat is disgusting. Wild honey which tastes nasty, unlike the nice stuff you buy at the store that comes from clover or citrus blossoms. You wouldn't want to put this honey in your mouth. And locusts: huge flying grasshoppers which are considered a plague upon the earth. In other words, John's food is the judgment of God. His garment is made of rough, scratchy camel hair. It makes you uncomfortable just to look at it; you can't imagine how prickly it would be to wear – but that's the point: John wants you to be uncomfortable and dissatisfied and hungry – not so much outwardly like he is (though John understands there is a connection between the body and soul) – but inside, in your spirit, hating your life as it is and longing for something better: a righteousness, a godliness, a holiness that you can never manage to achieve no matter how hard you try.

But if John's appearance and lifestyle are meant to rattle us out of our spiritual complacency, even more forceful are his words. And please take note upon whom he drops the biggest verbal bombs. It's not your rank and file sinner to whom anyone could point and say, "Yeah, that guy's life is a mess"; no, it's the Pharisees and Sadducees, that is to say, those who are the most outwardly religious and spiritual, those who are trying their hardest to keep the Law of God. These are the folks John calls the "brood of vipers", by which he means the spawn of Satan. These are the folks whom John threatens most urgently with the wrath of God to come. Why them? It's because they are the least likely to think of themselves as truly and thoroughly sinful. In their minds, they've got their bases covered, so to speak. "We're the children of Abraham. We're sons of the covenant. We're religiously observant. We keep the Law of Moses." They think of themselves of being in a pretty safe place spiritually. And that's the *most* dangerous place to be – which is why John points to the stones that represent the 12 tribes and tells them that it would be easier for God to make true children for Abraham from those rocks than from them. Hard stones the Lord can work with. Proudful, self-righteous, hard hearts are a bigger challenge even for him. Mercifully for us, with God all things are possible. But it means him having to break hard hearts. It means him having to threaten to chop down the trees that do not bear the fruit of repentance and cast them into the fire.

But he thing to understand is that John is talking to you, to you who think of yourself as being in a pretty safe place spiritually, to you who think that because you come to church, sing the hymns, listen to the Word read and explained, and give your offering, that you've got all the bases covered – even though that what happens here has no real impact on the way you live your day to day life because after all, you're comfortable with the way you are. Yes, he's talking to me too. And it's making me uncomfortable.

Listen. Can you hear it? It's the voice of one crying in the wilderness: the spiritual wilderness of our time, the spiritual wilderness in which we have turned the celebration of our Savior's birth into an orgy of consumerism and materialistic gluttony, of blinking lights, shiny

decorations, boughs of holly, and “ho ho ho merry Christmas” but with very little or no thought about our own personal need to self examine, to look deeply within, to uncover, to despise, and to root out the sins that so closely cling to us and that stand as obstacles to receiving the Christ as we should: first as the Savior by his suffering and death for our sin, and then as the righteous Judge. The voice in the wilderness is calling to you. “Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.” In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!