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Isaiah 11: 1 – 10  
Romans 15: 4 – 13

Psalm 72: 1 – 7, 18 – 19  
Matthew 3: 1 – 12

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What are we to make of this wild man, John the Baptizer? He is for all the world like chalk screeching on a blackboard, like a stone in your shoe, like your last exposed nerve that has just been trampled. There is no avoiding John or his right-out-there, in-your-face, clarion call message. A message which calls us to wake up out of our everyday way of being, our sleepwalking through life, and pay attention to God. And not only pay attention to God, but to draw closer in our awareness and our experience of God.

John, dressed in animal skins kept on with a leather girdle around his waist. John, subsisting off of bugs and wild honey in the desert. John, dressed and living like the Hebrew prophets before him, out in the middle of the wilderness, the desert, knee deep in the waters of the Jordan. John, as untamed as the beasts with which he shares his habitat.

John couldn't be more different than the image of a wise, old sage, sitting calmly on a mountain top dispensing wisdom and advice. He is neither a Buddha figure or a guru. Instead, he bursts on the stage of human history – salvation history – demanding our attention and our turning from whatever is preoccupying us in our daily lives.

There is no opulence amongst the rocky terrain with scrubby bushes and drought-tolerant vegetation. There is no lushness, none of the comforts which we so very much take for granted in our lives. There is no comfort at all in a place with the searing heat of day, the numbing cold of the night, the absolute stillness of the air or else the howling, sand-blowing winds around the rock outcroppings. There is nothing at all to distract John from his one mission, that of making himself completely available to God as the voice of one crying in the wilderness. As the voice of God calling us to come near. As the voice of a God, who, in John's understanding is anything but mild and meek.

John's God is a raging, wrathful, fire-breathing God, a God infuriated with the course of human existence and sinfulness. A God who is just waiting to push the red button and obliterate the world. So what ARE we to make of this prophet and the image of God which he presents as a prelude to Jesus' coming? How are we to align this prophetic vision with Emmanuel, God-with-us, in the person and ministry of Jesus?

After 2,000 years, we like the softer side of religion, the kindler, gentler approach to God that is more loving, but perhaps also in our minds and hearts, less demanding. Is John wackadoodle? Is he still someone for us to heed? Is he indeed a prophet – and a saint – not just for the time of Jesus but for our time as well? Is John's message still viable after we leave here today and return to our Christmas catalogue perusals, our holiday fervor and excitement, our everyday life?

Back at my old church, there was a man named Howard. Howard didn't exactly wear wooly, itchy camel hair clothes, but he did seem to always wear a camel colored, rather shabby, corduroy sport coat with elbow patches that was a size or two too small for Howard's large frame. There was usually a forlorn looking t-shirt underneath, spilling out over slouchy pants that were held up, not with a leather belt, but with a safety pin. Howard's glasses were those thick, Coke bottle type, always smudged and held together with the proverbial scotch tape. Howard's whitish hair was almost

always well-past a haircut and going in kinds of directions, and he always had several days of stubble on his chin. Howard was the closest person I have ever met to a real-life John the Baptizer. And I really enjoyed and loved Howard because he had the biggest heart and not a prejudiced bone in his body.

Bill, the rector, often referred to Howard as a 'modern day prophet,' and I think that is a very apt description. Howard, who had been at the church for at least a couple of decades, was finally elected to the Vestry where his voice could be better heard. And whether he was on Vestry or not, Howard never failed to remind us of the Gospel imperatives and our baptismal vows to respect the dignity of every human being and to seek and serve Christ in all persons. Howard always directed us towards God in our planning and our actions. But Howard's God was not the fire and brimstone God of John. Howard's God was a God of justice and mercy, a God of grace and reconciliation. So how do we reconcile ourselves and our own theology with that of John's?

"Prepare the way of the Lord," John cries out, "make his paths straight!" But how exactly are we to do that in our world of today? Do we stand on a bench down at the Farmers' Market and shake a floppy Bible as we call everyone to repentance with threats of destruction? I don't know about you, but I'm pretty uncomfortable with that model and I think that there is something to the old adage that it's easier to draw flies with honey than it is with vinegar. That doesn't mean sugarcoating and misrepresenting the call to turn to God, it just means that there might be better ways to get people's attention and hearts. And our view of Scripture (and our view of God) is always through the lens of the Gospels, the God revealed in the person and ministry and resurrection of Jesus.

There is a story told by a man visiting and walking with his friend who was a Lutheran pastor in a small town in Colorado a number of years ago. The two men were walking down a sidewalk on the main street downtown. The storyteller's friend stopped to introduce him to a man who was repainting one of the storefronts. The painter was very friendly and jovial with the two men, though he was not a member of the pastor's church. And in fact, he didn't belong to or attend any church in town. A few days earlier, the Lutheran pastor had invited the painter to church and the painter had replied, "Well, you'll just have to draw me a chalk line to the church so I can find it."

Well, the pastor's young daughter had heard that conversation. And so she later asked if she could do just that: draw a chalk line so that the man could find his way to the church. The pastor, aware of the humor in the idea, went out and bought a box of sidewalk chalk, as well as a long handled holder, so that she could draw the line down the seven blocks with some dignity.

The little girl was finishing up just as the painter arrived home. He was still laughing about it at the time that the storyteller met him a few days later. The painter hadn't yet been to church, but he certainly appreciated the good-humored repartee of the invitation. The little girl simply thought that she was making a path for the painter to get to church, which she had, but beyond that, she was making straight the path of God to the painter's door. Indeed, she got the painter's attention and heart with love. [Synthesis, 12.6.98]

So how do we make straight the path for others – how do we first make straight the path for ourselves? How do we clear away the obstacles that accumulate in our busy schedules, in our long list of voluntary and involuntary obligations, and in our plentiful resources that keep us from drawing closer to God? How do we transcend – and help others to transcend – the busyness of our lives in order to draw closer to the Light which is coming into the world? How do we make room in our lives for Jesus to come once again?

John seeks to persuade his audience with colorful, yet terrifying imagery of what will happen if we cease to bear fruit for God. We would hear that as our failure to live into our baptismal covenant. John also says that he baptizes with water for repentance (symbolic cleansing of old ways and a turning back to God), but that the one who is to come will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The fire of which John speaks is not a destructive, damning fire that hurts or destroys. Rather it is a refining fire, like that of a silversmith or smelter, burning out the impurities, the chaff, to cleanse and purify. The fire of which John speaks and with which Jesus will gift his followers is a fire of passion, a fire that loves us too much to let us get away with accepting our brokenness and our distractedness and settling for that as life. George MacDonald, a mentor to C. S. Lewis, said that the further we move away from God's love, the more it burns; the closer we come, the more it soothes and sustains us.

Here, on the Second Sunday of Advent, as we light two flames, may we use that light, that fire, not only to illuminate our darkness but to burn away all that is dross, all that which takes us away from God in our everyday lives. And may we reflect that Light so that we might help make straight the path to God for others who are lost.

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