

2nd Sunday of Advent, Year A

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” Those words drew the people to John the Baptist. The people of Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region along the Jordan went to him. I wonder what they expected? Were they really ready for John?

Did they expect to hear a truth teller, one who would tell the truth about God and their lives? Did they expect to see a man dressed in camel’s hair eating locust and honey? Did they expect a wild man who was willing to say whatever it took to save their lives? He held nothing back. He told them how it was. He even called some of them names. He spoke honestly, if not harshly, and told the truth, even if it hurt.

For some, it may have come as a relief. The truth was out, named, and they were free from the work of keeping secrets. They could finally face their lives. They could see a way forward. For others, it may have seemed an intrusion, a preacher who needs to mind his own business. Regardless, all were confronted with the reality and truth of their lives.

So what if I preached like John the Baptist? What if I spoke the truth in a way John did? “What brought you in here today? You brood of vipers! Why are you here? To get out of the cold? To see your friends? To make yourself feel better about how faithful and good you are? Are you here to give God that wish list you call prayer? I want to know what you are doing with your life. Where are you headed? Don’t give me some polite, banal answer. This is not dress-up or pretend time. This is serious, and there are

consequences to the way we live and the choices we make. So if you are here to change your ways, to live a different life, to open yourself to God, then show it. Live it. Let that be seen by the choices you make, the priorities you establish, the actions you take, and the words you speak. If that's not why you are here, then get out. Go on. Crawl back to the hole you came from."

What if I preached like John the Baptist? What would you think about that? How would you respond? What would you feel? I suspect there would be several different responses. Some would sit quietly, smile, nod appropriately, and let it all go in one ear and out the other. There would probably be a few parking lot meetings to discuss, "What got into him, and what are we going to do about it?" Bishop might get a few calls. I am sure e-mails would be flying and phones ringing.

That kind of preaching, those words, are not what we expect when we come to church. We don't come expecting to be criticized, judged, or made to feel uncomfortable. Sometimes it is even too much to be challenged or held responsible and accountable for ourselves. Maybe **"What if I preached like John the Baptist?"** is the wrong question. The better question is, why don't I preach like that? Why don't you demand and expect that of me or any other preacher?

I am sure there are lots of answers to those questions. Some of our reasons are legitimate, others are not. I wonder, though, if the real reason we don't, and what John is really getting at, is that we are content with life as it is,

maybe even indifferent. I don't mean we are content in the sense that everything is perfect, but that we have settled. We have found a way to manage our lives that, at least on the surface, is working. We know how to **“play the game”** and sometimes even win. We have become comfortable, and we don't want anyone messing with our lives, our plans, or our system. We go along to get along. I think that's often true for many of us, whether a priest or a parishioner.

So we show up hoping, wanting, and expecting to receive some affirmation and approval, to be told how much God loves us. We want to be told that we are fine just as we are, and we shouldn't change a thing.

After a while, however, that message starts to wear thin. Deep down, if we are sincere, we know better. We know ourselves and our world. We know the deep wounds that still hurt. We know the relationships that are struggling and broken. We can recall our words and actions that have hurt another and imprisoned us with guilt. We see hunger, poverty, and injustice, but offer explanations, excuses, and blame rather than our time, our money, and our efforts. We see how anxiety sometimes drives us to busyness and other times to isolation. We know how fear can control our lives. We medicate ourselves with that which can never heal us. We have been convinced that death is the end. We search for meaning and identity, something to fill the void. Content? Really?

We don't need that kind of affirmation and approval. That message only keeps us stuck. It maintains the status quo and its business as usual. It

denies us a way forward and leaves us hopeless. We need someone to speak the truth about our lives, to awaken us, to challenge us. To be hurt with the truth is better than to be killed by our contentment and indifference. We need a truth that says life does not have to stay like this, a truth that offers hope and a way forward. We need to be reminded that we can change and that God is always coming to us. John speaks that truth. His words call us to a life of holy discontent.

Contentment can blind us to the life God wants for us. It distracts us from that which is most important. It deceives us into believing this is all there is. This is as good as it gets. The real issue for most of us is not that we are bad people but that we are too content. That's why every year at this time, we hear from John the Baptist. We see him before we see Jesus. We hear his words before we hear Jesus' words. John is the gateway to Christmas. We cannot go around him. We must face up to him, to ourselves, and to the One who is coming. This facing up is at the heart of John's message, **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"**

Be careful here. Far too often, we have been told or led to believe that we must repent for the kingdom to come. That's just not true. It is the exact opposite. Listen to what John says, **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"** The kingdom has already come near. John is the pointing finger and the announcing voice that the kingdom has come near. Repentance is not what makes the kingdom arrive. It is how we show up to the kingdom that is already here. Repentance is our response to, not a

precondition of, the coming of the kingdom. Repentance is our acknowledgement of, entry into, and cooperation with the kingdom. Through repentance, we turn our gaze to meet Christ's gaze. We say yes to the coming of the One who is more powerful than us. That means we must examine our lives and make the appropriate changes. We change the direction and purpose of our lives to take our share in the kingdom of heaven and the life of Christ.

What do you find when you examine your life? What truth does John hold before you? What patterns of behavior destroy your life and relationships? Which voices distract and call you away from your most authentic way of being and living? What things do you do or say that hurt others or yourself? How do you deny or ignore your own holiness, the original beauty of your creation? Where in your life have you just gotten tired and lazy, unwilling to ask, seek, or knock? Do the examination, make the changes, and live a different life. Repent, change, not because you are bad, defective, or deficient, but because you are worth it; because you have been created in the image and likeness of God, because God loves you, and God is coming.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

To miss the truth and good news in John's message is to miss the kingdom and our own life. Let's not let this happen. Find the holy discontent in your life. Repent. Turn around. Look again. The kingdom is right here.

Amen.