

Second Sunday in Advent
2 Peter 3:8-15a, Psalm 85, Mark 1:1-8
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John the Baptist is the Advent Man. Every year on the second and third Sundays of Advent we read about John bursting onto the scene to shake things up. Someone referred to him as a “battering ram.” John sends shock waves through our approaching holiday tranquility. According to Mark’s gospel, he is the one crying in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

He obviously hit a chord because we’re told that “people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” I wonder what all they confessed. Did they shout it out for all to hear, then plunge into the water, or did they whisper their deep dark secrets into John’s ear before he sprinkled some river water on their heads? I can imagine the more chaotic scenario. Either way, they were leaving some old dirt behind and making a fresh start.

If Elijah was the first and one of the greatest prophets of Israel, John might very well have been the last. John dressed like Elijah. He wore animal fur and a leather belt around his waist. In 2 Kings 1:8, we read about Elijah: “He wore a garment of haircloth and a girdle of leather about his loins.” Both Elijah and John were non-conformists; neither was cut from the same cloth as everyone else. They were primitive in their dress and lifestyle. They were less concerned with the ways of the world and prevailing conventions and more concerned with the ways of God. They were Jewish mystics and hermits.

Elijah was referred to by one Jewish king as “the troubler of Israel.” John was finally beheaded by a later King Herod.

I don’t know who Alfred Delp is but I like this that he wrote: “Advent is a time for rousing. We are shaken to the very depths, so that we may wake up to the truth of ourselves. The primary condition for the fruitful and rewarding Advent is renunciation, surrender. We must let go of all our mistaken dreams, our conceited poses and arrogant gestures, all the pretenses with which we hope to deceive ourselves and others.”

The prophets are never popular because they show us things about ourselves or our culture or both that we don’t want to face, let alone change.

Mark’s gospel also connects John the Baptist with another prophet, Isaiah, “...the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” The prophets

call us to repentance to help get us back on the right pathways. A Turkish proverb reads, “No matter how far you have gone on a wrong path, turn back.”

One of our family traditions since 2008 has been to go for a hike in the mountains on the Friday after Thanksgiving. Last year five Teschners and three friends hiked a trail off the Skyline Drive. This past year only George and I and a friend, Chip Morgan, hiked up a small mountain not far north of Waynesboro. We had planned another hike off the Skyline Drive, but the parkway was closed due to a recent snow. We picked the alternate trail up Furnace Mountain because Chip and one of his friends help maintain a portion of the trail near there.

If you enjoy hiking in the mountains or in our nearby National Battlefield, the trails require regular maintenance. Chip said they bring bow saws and, on occasion, even a large two-man saw to remove tree trunks that have fallen across the path. They also remove fallen stones or add stones when rain runoff has eroded the trail.

The prophets sometimes forge new routes for us to venture out on, but more often they perform maintenance work on well-worn pathways much like Chip and his friend do. They enable us to get back on and stay on the right path and get from point A to point B without getting lost or injured.

The other thing the prophets do for us by creating and maintaining pathways is to remind us that without God’s help we cannot get out of the wildernesses we find ourselves in on our own. Trusting solely in ourselves is usually problematic. We always need to look for the one who is both coming and here to guide us, strengthen us and accompany us back where we belong.

I was having difficulty sleeping the other night as I started thinking about things I have lost in my life, which led to thinking about major possible future losses. Finally, I prayed for Jesus to fill the emptiness and I trusted the future to his care. Funny thing – after that I went right to sleep.

One of the true joys after a long hike is to get that first glimpse of the car through the trees. You know it is almost that time when you can stop walking, sit down and take off your boots and backpack. That sense of well- being after a long hard hike is like the peace that God gives when we know we are in his love and doing his will.

Whereas Mark uses the imagery of straight pathways to follow God, in 2 Peter, the author writes that we should be people who lead lives of “holiness and godliness.” In a reflection I read on this reading in 2 Peter, the author, Matthew Schlimm, a Bible professor, points out five aspects of holiness from the Hebrew Scriptures.

In the first place, things that are holy, like the Temple in Jerusalem, belong to God. We are holy, therefore, when we act like we belong to God.

Secondly, things that are holy are complete. He writes that if something is complete, “It has integrity; it’s darn near perfect.” We are acting holy and complete when we give God our very best and not what’s left over. He uses the example of rolls fresh from the oven and not the ones we forgot about in the back of the fridge, or the crisp new \$100 bills rather than the crinkled up and tattered old one dollar bills we still have at the end of our pay period.

A third aspect of holiness, according to Schlimm, is that holy things are beautiful. The ancient Temple was a thing of awe and majesty surrounded with pillars, filled with colorful linens with rich embroidery and decorations made of gold, silver and copper. To be in it was like returning to the Garden of Eden where God was present, greater than we could ever be, and worthy of our worship. Schlimm doesn’t say how being beautiful directly relates to us, but perhaps it means that we keep our lives beautiful on the inside in reverence for God.

Similarly then, the fourth quality of being holy is purity. Today we think of sexual purity and that is important, but in Jesus’ day, purity was also associated with the food one ate, ritual cleanliness for worship and the people with whom one associated. While Jesus criticized some for going so far as to put purity measures before mercy and compassion toward people, being pure in heart is one of the beatitudes. Can we expel unclean thoughts that may lead to harmful attitudes and actions?

The final attribute of holiness that Schlimmer mentions, and the one I’m most familiar with, is to be set apart. Jews have historically been persecuted because they followed practices that set them apart from other people. Early on, they worshiped one God when polytheism was the prevalent understanding. John the Baptist may have set himself apart for a prolonged period in the wilderness to hear God’s voice more clearly, but most of us are called to live in the world but not conform to the world, as the New Testament tells us.

Our goal in the Christian life then is always toward greater holiness: belonging to God; striving toward completeness, wholeness or perfection; focusing on beauty within and purity of heart or being quick to love, slow to judge and, finally, standing apart and standing out, not to elevate ourselves but to be a voice and pathway so others can recognize “the one more powerful than I, the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.”

If all this sounds too challenging, we are reminded in the 2nd letter of Peter that God is patient. However, we had better be careful not to try God’s patience. AMEN.

