

Second Sunday in Advent
Isaiah 11:1-10, Psalm 72, Matthew 3:1-12
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Each second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist takes center stage. He doesn't arrive quietly. He explodes on the scene and offends our sensibilities. He is the original Sasquatch – a disturbing figure with unkempt hair, a honey-matted beard and a few locust legs and wings hanging from the corners of his mouth.

It's a wonder anyone wants to hear his message, yet we're told in Matthew's gospel that the people are streaming from Jerusalem and the surrounding region to the banks of the Jordan River where it ran along the edge of the wilderness. His clothing is ragged and minimal – camel hair and a leather belt, the same outfit an earlier and much renowned prophet wore. In fact, the sacred texts of the Jews foretold that this prophet, Elijah, would return immediately before Israel's long-awaited messiah. There would be little doubt among the people that John fit the bill.

His message was anything but affirming and congratulatory. "Repent" originally was a word in Greek to command soldiers to do an about face. "Repent," in a religious context, meant to change one's ways 180 degrees. A change of attitude, heart and mind would lead ultimately to new behavior – sweet figs instead of sour grapes. It's nearly impossible to make a complete turn around in one's life, and, hopefully, we wouldn't need it unless we had crashed into a wall or plunged into the abyss. Then, it's change or die.

Most of us are making incremental changes throughout our lives, but even that isn't always easy or natural. We have a tendency to want to defend our behavior even when it's bad. For example, over the Thanksgiving holiday, four Teschner men were together for several days. Juanita will tell you that when two or more Teschner men get together, there is loud, passionate conversation with little room for quieter people to get a word in edgewise.

At dinner one night, my older brother, Doug, said, "Teschner men aren't good listeners." We bantered the idea around long enough to finally conclude that we can both talk and listen at the same time, and we had no need to change. That's utter nonsense, of course, but it shows our inclination for self-vindication rather than amendment of life.

Getting back to John, perhaps he was attractive to the masses because he was so unorthodox; he dared to be different. Mark Twain said, "Anyone who is virtuous is eccentric." John practiced a lifestyle of simplicity and divestment, having adopted the barren and rugged wilderness for his home. There, one can more readily hear God.

Baptism, unlike for us Christians, was not in the Jewish prayer book. In fact it was used exclusively for Gentiles who wanted to join the Jewish faith. Jews didn't need a water ritual to wash off their Gentile stain; after all, they were the chosen people. The fact that so many were

coming for John's baptism of repentance indicates the extent of the spiritual emptiness they felt along with their yearning for the better days which would follow the messiah's arrival – Isaiah's peaceable kingdom.

John chastises the Sadducees and Pharisees, the same Jewish groups that would later contend with Jesus, because they didn't come to repent. Most likely, they came to check John out, determine his credentials and maybe give him their stamp of approval – in other words, domesticate him.

Prophets throughout history, whether religious or secular, often go unheeded and may be persecuted and discredited by those who have the most to lose from the change the prophets propose. The winners, or those in power, will do just about anything to hold onto their advantageous position, oftentimes denying the truth at the cost of impending disaster. Did we learn the lessons of our most recent financial crisis? Some would say, No, because the financial institutions and those who profit from them also wield great influence. And then there is global warming.

John could call for radical change because his lifestyle proved he had applied such change to himself first.

In addition to Isaiah's description of the harmonious, peaceable kingdom, he also refers to a shoot from the stump of Jesse. Jesse was King David's father. The Davidic dynasty had ceased or been cut off. Isaiah is planting much needed hope that a king like David, maybe even from David's lost lineage, would emerge to rule Israel to greatness once more.

For Christians, the shoot is obviously Jesus. But over the centuries, other shoots have emerged such as John the Baptist or more recently, Nelson Mandela – people who pop up and stand out for great good.

Another less known shoot was Richard Kirkland, who at age 19 was a sergeant in the Confederate army. Eleven days before Christmas, on December 14, 1862, he was one of 200,000 Union and Confederate soldiers facing each other across a broad, bloody and body-splattered battlefield in Fredericksburg. Peace and goodwill were far from most men's minds. The past few days had been gruesome with more than 12,000 soldiers killed and hundreds more wounded and still lying between the lines.

Kirkland, of Company E of the Second South Carolina Brigade, had seen and heard enough. He startled his commanding officer, General Joseph Kershaw, when he said, "General, Sir, I can't stand this! All day and all night I hear those poor Federals calling for water. I ask permission to go and give them water."

Kershaw shook his head sympathetically. "Sergeant," he replied, "You'd get a bullet through your head the moment you stepped over the stone wall."

"Yes sir," answered Kirkland, "I know that, but I'm willing to try it anyway."

The General responded, "The sentiment which prompts you is so noble I will not refuse your request. God protect you. You may go."

Quickly, the South Carolinian hurtled over the wall and immediately exposed himself to the fire of every Yankee sharpshooter in that vicinity. Young Kirkland walked calmly toward the enemy lines until he reached the nearest wounded soldier. Kneeling down he took off his canteen and gently lifted the fallen enemy soldier's head to give him a long deep drink of refreshing, cold water. Then he placed a knapsack under the head of his foe and moved on to the next one and the next. Racing against the lengthening shadows of a short December afternoon, he returned again and again to his lines where comrades handed him full canteens. Not a single shot was fired.

For a moment, even in the midst of war, the peaceable kingdom broke in. A shooter dared to put his weapon aside to be a shoot – a living symbol of the shoot of Jesse.

Along with Jesus, John the Baptist, Richard, Nelson and thousands more, may we strive to be shoots for establishing God's reign of peace, forgiveness and love. AMEN.