

JOHN THE PROPHET

A SERMON FOR ADVENT II  
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2013  
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
MARIANNA, FLORIDA  
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MATTHEW 3:1-12

There are three great strains of scripture that are a part of the literature and liturgy of Advent.

The first is the wonderful collection of Old Testament prophecies, which point to the coming of the Christ. Some of these are the familiar passages from Isaiah and others that foretell the birth of the Messiah. Others are the powerful prophecies that tell of the Second Coming. All are part of the Advent preparation for the celebration of the Birth of Christ.

The second great strain of scripture is those gospel stories that tell us of what happened with Mary and Joseph and the Angel Gabriel. Matthew tells us of the angel appearing to Joseph and Luke tells us of the angel coming to Mary.

But there is a third great strain in scripture, a tale that is woven into the narrative in both Matthew and Luke. These passages include the story of the Annunciation, and the hymn that Mary sang which we call the Magnificat. This is the story of John the Baptist, and includes the story of how the angel appeared to his parents, the priest named Zechariah, and his wife, Mary's kinswoman, Elizabeth.

John the Baptist becomes an important character in announcing the advent of the ministry of Jesus. In fact, John is the forerunner foretold in Isaiah, who will prepare the way of the Lord. I preached a sermon entitled The Forerunner during Advent of last year, and dwelt on that aspect of John's ministry.

I also dwelt on the difference between the baptism of John, for the repentance of sins, and the baptism of Jesus for the remission of sins. I may even have told that terrible old joke about the fellow I grew up with, Robert Davis, who would argue that the Baptist church was older than Christianity, because it was founded by John the Baptist, and John baptized Jesus. But that is another sermon for another time. Baptism as a sign of repentance, as a washing away of sin, as a means of entry into the covenant community, is indeed older than Christianity, and was practiced by the Jews.

That John, the son of a priest, is out in the countryside, baptizing people in the rivers, is radical and revolutionary. But he'd captured the attention of the people, and they followed him, came out to hear him, came out to be baptized.

John was a figure that attracted attention. We read that he wore clothing made of camel's hair. Now there is a tradition that sees John as this wild man who lived in the wilderness and dressed in the raggedy hide of a dead camel. I don't think that is what the scripture says at all. It says that he wore clothing made of camel's hair. One of the finest garments in my wardrobe is my camel's hair sport coat. I've had it for more than thirty years. It's showing a little wear, but it is still soft and warm, and I wear it on cold mornings. By the way, that I can still wear it after 30 years just tells you that I was as fat then as I am now!

John wore camel's hair where most people wore linen or wool, or a blended fabric kind of like what the early settlers in America called "linsey-woolsey". And where most men wore a rope

belt, or a sash made of the same fabric as their garment, John wore a leather belt so wide as to be described as a girdle.

I've said this before, and some of you've heard it, and I almost used it as the title for this sermon: John the Baptist was a sharp dressed man!

There is also a question about what he ate: locusts and wild honey. Bugs dipped in honey!

But wait a minute. As a youngster growing up in Tennessee, I helped cut and set a lot of fence posts. Most of them were cedar. But the coveted fence posts were locust posts. Particularly black locust posts. They'd never rot, and were a whole lot stronger than the cedar posts.

So I guess I've always known that a locust is an insect, and a locust is also a tree. What I didn't realize was that the same was true in the Middle East at the time of Jesus and John the Baptist, and that the locust tree has a bean that is found in its seed pod, and that that bean is very similar in taste, texture and composition to the carob bean, which tastes like chocolate.

Now if I told you someone sat around eating carob beans and tupelo honey, you'd have a very different image than what we normally think of when we hear of John the Baptist, wouldn't you?

So John was a sharp dressed man, who ate sweet stuff, and preached in the wilderness, and baptized in the river.

But more importantly than that, he was a prophet: he foretold the coming of the Messiah, the Christ.

The words that close our text this morning are the introduction to the narrative of the baptism of Jesus. And make no mistake about it, they are words of prophecy. Many lists of the prophets end not with Malachi in the Old Testament, but with John the Baptist in the New.

In our text, when he saw the Pharisees and Sadducees coming out to hear him, he spoke words of judgment upon them, sounding like Jeremiah, prophesying the destruction of the nation of Israel and the temple cult which they represented.

John told them that he could baptize them with water, for repentance, in other words, if they were sorry for their sins and turned away from them, John could baptize them and that would be a sign of their new resolve to turn away from the sins of the past, but as also Mark reports, he told them that the one who was coming would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

And John not only foretells the coming of Jesus, he foretells the judgment that will come at the end of time: the image he uses here is not the one that Jesus uses at the close of Matthew's gospel, that of the shepherd separating the sheep from the goats, but the one of a thresher on the threshing floor, separating the good grain from the chaff. It is an image found in the Old Testament, even in the first Psalm, where the ungodly, the wicked, are described as the chaff which the wind drives away.

John the prophet stood on the brink of history: the Messiah was already in the world, but the world not only knew Him not, He had not yet begun His ministry. John is the one who announced to the world that not only is He coming, He is here.

We stand in the line of the prophets, for we too are charged to speak God's words to God's people, and indeed to all the world. We are charged, like John, to tell the world that not only is Jesus coming, but Jesus is here.

Like John, we are unworthy to even carry his sandals, but like John, we are prophets and forerunners, called to prepare the way of the Lord.

Let every heart prepare Him room. We sing it in one of the songs of the season. May it be our message each and every day.

Amen and amen.