

Sermon - December 4, 2011  
Year B - The Year of Mark - Advent 2  
Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72 or 72:1-8; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

This morning, I would like us to have a fresh look at John the Baptist. Generally, most of us go through life and do not think much about him. However, in Advent, he comes to us; and he has some things to tell us with respect to our lives and the season in which we find ourselves.

Sometimes in the late fall, we are lucky and have a day that feels more like springtime than like autumn. We can have a day that is so bright, light, and warm that we almost forget that it is late November or early December. It does not happen often, but when it does, we take notice.

In some respects, John the Baptist is like that spring day in late autumn. He is unexpected.

Today, we have the arrival of John the Baptist in our Gospel. I find it easy to picture him. He is a physically strong man, about 30 years old, with shaggy hair, strange clothing, and a loud voice.

He comes among us, as he does each Advent, and his message sounds inconvenient, out of season. After all, in December, we are not thinking about the kind of things of which John the Baptist speaks.

In December, we are thinking of Christmas lists, shopping, and decorating. It is time to turn up the heat, wrap Christmas presents, and make sure we have bags of deicer for our sidewalks. Then, John the Baptist comes along, like the freakish spring weather we sometimes experience late in the year. He comes with an unexpected and even contrary message. In a figurative sense, he wants us to start spring-cleaning even though it is December. He wants us to take on one room after another, and not only our homes, but also our lawns and garages and storage sheds, as well. In a word, what this scruffy prophet wants us to do is repent.

For what does repentance mean, if not a thorough, cleaning of the spiritual house in which we live. John is not speaking about the structure of brick and stone, shingles and siding, but that house we call our lives, our soul, our inner residence, in other words, our heart. Today, John the Baptist shows up, in what we call the Advent, Christmas, or even the holiday season, and he demands that we start cleaning as though it were spring. He arrives preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

John the Baptist has a point. Maybe the old place of is a bit of a wreck. Maybe there is ample reason for this prophet to call us to account, insisting that we clean house and repent.

Probably in all of our spiritual residences, our lives, there are rooms that are dominated by the clutter of sins, neglect of God and our fellow man. There are corners where dust,

and dirt, and trash of the things done and left undone have accumulated. There are signs of ill repair, where the paint is peeling, the carpet is frayed, and the drapes have faded because we have not attended to the life of faith God expects of us. The windows of our hearts are grimy; they barely let in the light of the sun. Such are the conditions on the inside.

The outside is no better; and it is more public. Our public life of faith, the example we set, and the way in which we live out our faith among others, in that space, there is trash in the yard, and weeds are flourishing where flowers should grow.

In the middle of all of this, John the Baptist comes along, rude prophet that he is, and points to all of these defects in our lives both private and public. He drags his fingers through the dust of our hearts, kicks the pop can lying on the front lawn of our conscience. It is December, we want to think of Christmas lights and wrapping paper; however, before we can think of any of that, John the Baptist wants us to repent. He wants us to go into spring-cleaning, and into the repairing of our hearts, souls, and lives before we begin to think of the manger and shepherds.

The message of repentance John the Baptist gives is inconvenient. It is easy to want to ignore him, and simply say, "So what if some of our relationships are broken, and that we look on others with contempt? So what if our days and nights, hours and minutes, are so driven that we have no time for our Creator? So what if stuff so fills every room of our inner selves, and the desire for more deadens our hearts. So what if we live to spend, rather than spend to live? So what if we see people as disposable, or if we feel that breaking the commandments against them as justified?"

John is doing his work as a prophet by pointing out that our spiritual house needs work. He is willing to tell us the truth. He shakes the foundations of our fantasies by uttering a single word, and passing on a message that comes from God, "Repent!"

Prepare the way of the Lord is the theme of John the Baptist and of Advent. It is time to clean house, John tells us. It is time to sweep the floors, wash the walls, and repair what is broken.

John insists that we clean house because the Messiah is coming. He calls us to repent because heaven's kingdom is near.

These days of Advent are like that if we listen to John the Baptist. They are the time for spring-cleaning right here in December. Before we get to Bethlehem, or become too caught up in all the "stuff" that surrounds Christmas, John is here to remind us what all this is really about in December. We repent, confess, and admit to God our need for his Son. We confess to God our need for a Savior. Jesus was born because we sin. He was born because our spiritual houses, our lives, are actually in such disrepair that we cannot clean them up on our own. We need help. We need a Savior born in Bethlehem.

We repent to make our hearts ready for him. There is clutter in our lives that we need to throw away. Advent is like a big trash can of confession and preparation. It tells us to

look and asks, "What can you throw in?" What can any of us throw in? Put into that waste container every instance of pride, hypocrisy, and impatience from your life. Put into it unholy anger and envy. Put into it lust for things, negligence in prayer and worship. Throw away with confession every failure to live your faith, and every refusal to trust in the grace and power of God.

Spring-clean your house, your life, this Advent. Prepare the way of the Lord. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. Open the front door and welcome in the child of Christmas, the man of Easter, the king of glory for he is here to dwell with you forever. Amen.