

A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

Advent 3 – Cycle C: Luke 3:7-18

I find it amusing that on this Sunday when the order of the day is joy – this is Gaudete (“rejoice”) Sunday – we have John the Baptist scowling at and reaming out almost everyone who shows up to be baptized by him at the River Jordan. Although not the most joyful character in the New Testament, he is, without question, one of the most colourful and outspoken. Today’s reading also suggests that he was charismatic; that people were drawn to him.

It may also be that in these years when Herod was rebuilding the Jewish temple, John and others felt that the Hebrew faith had lost its “primitive excellence” (as Luther would later say of Christianity). In the big picture, Herod’s rebuilding the temple seemed to be a good thing because it re-established the people, even though their country was occupied and governed by Rome. But people like John had reason for their concern. The temple was its own culture, and attracted a kind of devotion that resembled the other religions from which Judaism had separated itself. There was a large and visible priesthood; there was a hierarchy of positions and orders in the temple. Sacrifices were offered daily as people brought animals to be slaughtered, cooked, and eaten. Righteousness, which stands at the heart God’s law, was being accomplished more through participating in temple rituals than an authentic encounter with the law that resulted in, among other things, right actions.

And so, John distances himself from the temple in several ways. He finds a location in the countryside and begins to proclaim a message of reformation and renewal that is so radical it seems to be a breath of fresh air for those who hunger for more than the institution of the temple is offering them. In many ways, John resembles the earlier prophets. Matthew tells us that he was an ascetic, living in the wilderness; that his clothing was rugged and that he foraged for food. But his message was also prophetic: he carried a righteous anger concerning how religion had replaced faith among the people of God; and like every good prophet, he foresaw a day of reckoning, and refers to it in this morning’s Gospel.

But John is also aware that God is at work and has raised up a great teacher whose message will bring about not only reform, but transformation; that the Hebrew faith will truly live in this man’s hands; that his temple will not be built of stone and be located in Jerusalem. Rather, the temple of Jesus’ proclamation will take form within and among the people of God as God’s law lives in and through and among them. John’s prophecy was such a profound and radical message that found resonance with so many of the people who came to hear him preach that they thought he might well be God’s Messiah. “No,” he tells them, “one more powerful than I is coming to baptize you not with water, but with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

But what all the gospel writers allow us to see is the continuity of John’s message and Jesus’ teaching. And it is conspicuous in today’s reading from Luke’s Gospel. Justice is at the heart of what Luke calls for the first time “the good news”. He says to the tax collectors who made a good living by collecting more money than Rome required, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” In the same way he says of the corrupt practices by soldiers, “Do not extort money from people through an abuse of your power, and be satisfied with your wages.” Justice and respect for others, especially those over whom we have power and authority, is characteristic of the new era, the new regime John proclaims and Jesus will teach. Similarly, privilege is challenged and generosity commended: “Whoever has two tunics must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” When Jesus begins his ministry, he will enlarge on what John teaches. Jesus will lead people to sacrificial love and restorative justice. Unlike John, Jesus will emphasize mercy and forgiveness, and will coach out righteousness in people from its backdrop of sin. Transformation will trump the unquenchable fire John prescribes as the corrective for sin. Wheat and chaff will be accepted together because of the redeeming and saving work of Christ. Yes, John is a breath of fresh air, but he is correct when he acknowledges Jesus’ proclamation as definitive. There is more, John tells his “brood of vipers”.

What are our temples? Who is our John the Baptist?

When I was a boy in school, I learned the phrase “might is right,” and I learned how empty such a claim is; that might has nothing to do with being right and doing good. But throughout my life, I have seen the world intent on proving the statement “might is right” by investing in power and conditions that lead to power; by condoning privilege and discrediting those less fortunate; by creating a value system that

supports growth and prosperity and strength and advantage; a value system in which winning is everything and losing is nothing. I expect "might is right" is the temple we in the west, we in the developed world, worship at, sacrifice to, and serve.

Several years ago now, we saw two federal political parties who really did not have much in common compromise themselves in order to unite the right; to have enough power to win a federal election and (as we say) "take power". There is also a unite the left movement.

In the world economy we have the G-8 countries coalescing their power in order to dominate and control. Takeovers are common in big business: in fact, many big businesses have the capacity to bring governments to their knees, and do so routinely as policies are changed to give advantage to big money. Money may make the world go round, but it is power in which we see true investment. Our temple, our guarantee that everything will turn out alright on our last day – a far more concrete reality than the Day of the Lord – is "might is right."

Our John the Baptists, the prophetic voices, are not so much people as events.

Friday's shooting at Shady Hook Elementary School in Newtown Connecticut brings us to ground in a blink. Human life is not about accumulating and accruing power and winning, the events of this weekend say to us: human life is about loving one another and caring for one another; creating safe places; dedicating ourselves to the justice and peace that produces such environments. Weapons have no place in our homes or on our person. Might is not right, is the prophetic voice of Shady Hook.

Similarly, the destruction of our planet by unrestrained development and industrialization is a John the Baptist for our time. Living in harmony with nature, preserving its sacred balance, forsaking notions of entitlement as regards what the earth can produce not so much for our needs as for our convenience and comfort is the way back. But like so many of the people in John's day, we really don't want to change. We are reluctant to repent.

The good news of the gospel – of today's Gospel and of the gospel as it is incarnated in Jesus Christ – the joy we celebrate today is that God is present in the prophetic voices we hear in the wilderness and confusion of life; that God is in, with, and under the call for justice and generosity and care for the environment and re-ordering our values so that people come first, not the lust for power and control. God is the breath of fresh air we so desperately need in the smog of sin we have come to accept as tolerable. Can we open the doors and windows and let God's fresh air in?