

“Sometimes We Need To Hear a Direct Word”

Matthew 3:1–12

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Advent is the season in the Christian year when we sense the greatest disconnect between our expectations and the lectionary texts. We think of preparing for the birth of Jesus, an idyllic scene which leads to the salvation of the world, but the First Sunday of Advent includes apocalyptic words from Jesus, a warning about how unexpected the coming of the Son of man will be.

On the Second Sunday of Advent John the Baptist shows up wearing clothing made of camel’s hair, eating locusts and wild honey, preaching about sin and repentance, swinging an ax, and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire! We don’t find any of these images on our Christmas cards. They are not what we want to see and hear. And because biblical texts shape other worship elements, we don’t even get to sing many of our favorite hymns until it is almost Christmas!

But the problem is more with our expectations than the texts. Advent is a time of preparation for the coming of the Christ, but not just in a Bethlehem stable over 2,000 years ago, in our time as well, and at the great consummation of human history.

The real-world birth of Jesus may be idyllic in meaning, but it is not in substance for those taking part in it. Mary gives birth in an animal shed — birth itself being dangerous in this time, and birth among animals even more so.

Furthermore, soon after Jesus’ birth, the family will have to flee to Egypt as Herod slaughters innocents in the area in an effort to kill Jesus. So much for “the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.”

And when it comes to John, well, he’s not warm and cuddly, he won’t translate into an animated film, but he does speak truth that resonates with the life and message of the One whose birth we celebrate. He speaks directly to human need, bluntly even, but sometimes we need a direct word. It’s what prophets speak. It’s what Jesus speaks.

It's like what parents sometimes need to communicate to our children as an expression of the deepest kind of love. We are not their friends or buddies, they have plenty of those, we are their parents who sometimes need to speak a difficult but necessary word of guidance or correction, though not all parents seem to have gotten this message.

I think of a situation in another church I served. The youth were using the time between Sunday School and worship to slip out a third-floor window and climb on the roof. When I learned about this, I went with the Sunday School Director to talk to them, directly but kindly, not in an overbearing way but making it clear that they could not walk around on that roof. It was dangerous, and on top of everything else, they were minors. So, I was legally responsible for their safety.

The conversation with the youth went fine, but then I heard from some of their parents who had grown up in the church. They said, "We understand you talked to our kids about not going up on the roof. We did that when we were teenagers." "Yes," I said, "but when you did, were there not some adults in the church who confronted you and told you to stop?" "Well, yes," they said, to which I replied, "I know this is hard to imagine, but you are now the adults in this recurring story."

At some point, we all need to hear a direct word about something, and speaking directly is what John the Baptist does. Furthermore, the truth he speaks resonates with the ministry of Jesus, even if it takes a different tone. There may be a disconnect between our expectations and John's preaching, but there is no disconnect between John and Jesus.

It begins with John's naming of sin and repentance. Brokenness is part of the human condition, and a central purpose of Jesus' ministry is to offer a redemptive response to it. Frailties are not the only defining mark of humankind, we are made in God's image, and where we fall short, God in Christ offers grace. But God doesn't offer grace so that we can continue living in ways beneath our purpose. God calls us to a better life, to repentance. It's not that we have to earn God's favor. It's that God cares about how we live because God cares about us.

New Testament professor David Bartlett says that John and Jesus bring an astonishing combination of acceptance and admonition. We are

cherished for who we are but responsible for what we do. Yet this is good news because it means God cares about us. If God loves us enough to welcome us into Christ's family, God loves us enough to expect something of us (*Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 1, p.46).

Some years ago, my father shared with us some pictures and miscellaneous information from my childhood. One item was a report card from elementary school on which I received an unsatisfactory grade for conduct. The note said, "Little Christopher has difficulty controlling his talking." I don't remember that at all. I was a quiet child...

What I do remember was a teacher writing the comment, "Christopher is working up to his potential." I remember this because my mother went ballistic with the teacher, embarrassing me. She said, "What do you know about his potential?!" It was not a criticism of me or a demand for better work; it was an expression of love.

That's how God regards us, that's why repentance is part of the good news of Christmas. We don't need to beat ourselves down. Too many of us have experienced enough of that already in unhealthy homes, hostile workplaces, and bad religion. We don't benefit from obsessing over judgment, but we do need to find a place for responsibility.

It is a deeply personal matter. Each of us has our own recurrent challenges, and we may or may not focus on what matters most to God. In his *Confessions* Saint Augustine talks a great deal about his sin of stealing a pear, and there are layers to why he names this as a weighty sin. But this is the man who had quite a rambunctious adolescence and young adulthood. In this time, he supposedly said, "Lord, make me chaste, but not yet!" Was a stolen pear the biggest issue in his life?

That was between Augustine and God, as is our condition. We are assured of grace but encouraged to be honest that we might become more, even in this holy season. As a beloved hymn says, "O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in; be born in us today."

John begins with a direct word about sin and repentance. He then calls the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers, urges them to bear fruit worthy of repentance, and says they can't rely on their heritage,

saying, “We have Abraham for our ancestor,” because God can raise up from these stones children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees and every tree that does not bear fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

They are harsh words, even for religious leaders who oppose John and Jesus. They seem more than direct, they seem vengeful, but that depends on how we understand them. There are two practical possibilities but only one that makes sense theologically. Is John talking about chopping down his and Jesus’ opponents and throwing them in the fire? Later he says the chaff, the waste products, Jesus will burn with unquenchable fire. That is how some people envision hell, though the view is informed by Dante and Milton as much as scripture.

Jesus talks about Gehenna, but it is an actual place outside the wall in the old city of Jerusalem, Gehinnom, the Valley of Hinnom. It is where waste was burned, including some human bodies not given proper burial. When one thought of being separated from God in eternity, the worst possible outcome, this valley was the most provoking image available. When I last saw it, it was farmland with a horse grazing on it.

But are we to take these images literally? Does a loving God take pleasure in vengefully torturing those deemed to be unfaithful, like the worst human beings finding pleasure in seeking vengeance on enemies? Does John mean that Jesus takes the ax to his enemies?

Or does he mean that Jesus will cut out all evil from its roots and toss it in the fire so that it cannot grow back? This is the other possibility, one that fits the character of the Christ who forgives those who put him to death while they put him to death. If this is the meaning, such evil might lie within us but also within the church, our culture, and the world. Evil affects individuals, structures, and systems, and thus must be addressed on all these levels. John says Jesus’ intent is to root out all that tarnishes and poisons human life and community.

In our lives there are many challenges with anger and jealousy, the tendency to hold on to resentment and pride, personal indiscretions and selfish behaviors, in addition to the increased possibility in times like this that we might question whether there really is a God or what difference God makes. These things may not be evil per se, but left

unattended, they can grow into major barriers to faithfulness and contentment. In the realm of God Jesus brings near, these things are nipped in the bud, the root causes are addressed.

The church has its own issues. There are all sorts of quirks and idiosyncrasies each church has, traditions and practices that hinder the church's witness and ability to welcome new people. I think of the small-town church a young Fred Craddock served which refused to welcome new people who worked in a factory because they were not like the town folk. Years later Craddock found the building packed because it had become a BBQ restaurant. The church had died.

But beyond local church barriers to faithfulness, the church as a whole in this culture has its own array of evils — the cover-up of harassment and abuse, complicity with neglecting the poor and rejecting the stranger, refusing to acknowledge new understandings or even talk about some issues, getting stuck playing church rather than being the body of Christ in the world. Much of this needs to be cut down at the root, and it will take people as direct as John the Baptist to pull it off.

In their book *Resident Aliens* Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon make this statement without confessing which one of them thinks this, “Indeed, one of us is tempted to think there is not much wrong with the church that could not be cured by God calling about a hundred really insensitive, uncaring, and offensive people into ministry (p. 167).” This is hyperbole, we don't need insensitivity, but in many ways, the church needs to hear a direct word about evil within.

So does our culture and world — a culture obsessed with wealth and power, pleasure and entertainment; a world rich in resources but tarnished by poverty and violence. There are more demons than we can name, much less take on, but the One who brings God's realm near will take an ax to the roots of such evil someday, somehow, perhaps using us to do so. It may feel more in the mood of this season to bask in the beautiful vision of Isaiah — a world where all creation is set right — but this vision can only come to be if all that stands in its way is rooted out.

That's why John is here today. Sometimes we need to hear a direct word about ourselves and the world around us. Sometimes... like today.