

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
December 13, 2009 (3rd Sunday of Advent)
Matthew 3:1-12
“An Advent Quartet: Matthew’s Passion”

Bach’s C minor prelude is relentless. One chord per measure, broken down into its fundamental harmonies, then repeated for added emphasis. It is not something you could listen to for hours at a time. In fact, Bach only sustained the pattern for twenty-four measures before he slowed things down and literally changed his tune. Sort of like when John the Baptist broke off his tirade against the church folk who stood before him by the banks of the Jordan River and began to talk about the One who was to come, whose sandals he wasn’t worthy to carry. Yet even as the final major chord in Bach’s piece rings out in conclusion, the memory of the prelude’s relentless intensity never fully fades away. In the same way, echoes of John the Baptist’s preaching continually ripple through the words we speak as we prepare for the birth of Jesus Christ.

Why is John the Baptist always invited to our Advent parties in the church? Here we sit amid purple banners and tastefully-lit trees awaiting the birth of the baby Jesus when suddenly John the Baptist bursts onto the scene. You can’t avoid him; he at the beginning of all four gospels. He’s like a street preacher shouting about sin and repentance from our front porch just as we’re sitting down to a nice dinner of Christmas ham and scalloped potatoes. He’s there, pacing around in his animal skin tunic and his purist’s diet of locusts, wild honey and raw foods, disturbing all our comfortable, annual rituals of the Christmas season. Why is that?

My mother-in-law once told me this story about the “Alcan” Highway. After Pearl Harbor was attacked, the U.S. government decided that an inland route to Alaska was essential. But this meant laying a highway over 1500 miles through rugged Canadian wilderness during times of year when the temperature hovered near 40 below zero for weeks on end. Finally, the Alaska-Canada Highway was built. But, as you can imagine, there are long stretches of it in which there are no signs of civilization. There are three hundred mile gaps between Dawson Creek and Toad River Lodge, or between Bear Creek and the Salmon Bake RV Park. Occasionally there are hitchhikers on the Alcan highway. Now, holding up a sign that simply says “Fairbanks or bust” won’t be very effective, since any driver that picks you up will likely be stuck with your company for several days. So some hitchhikers got creative. One held up a sign that said “Good Storyteller.” My favorite is the one whose sign read “I have chocolate.”

Imagine John the Baptist hitchhiking out there in the wilderness between Jerusalem and the Jordan River. It is hard to believe that he would have much success holding up a sign which read “You Brood of Vipers.” Nor would he ever be picked up waving a sign that said “You’re Heading for Unquenchable Fire.” Why did people flock down to the Jordan River to listen to John? I don’t think it was just out of curiosity. His was a loud, relentless, prophetic voice, modeled after old Elijah. John called things as he saw them, and what he saw wasn’t pretty. There was no justice or true righteousness in the land.

The Romans oppressed the people and influential local people kept their own power and prestige by helping the Romans stay in control.

Maybe people came out to hear John because they were tired of compromising their faith just to survive in a hostile environment. Maybe they were anxious to hear someone say plainly that God does care about what was going on and one day God will hold everyone accountable. That there will be a time of reckoning and ultimate justice.

Accountability is a big part of John's message. No one wants to live in an amoral world, where the #1 commandment is not "Love Thy Neighbor" but "Do Whatever You Want, Just Don't Get Caught." Accountability can be a very difficult lesson to learn. Tiger Woods, for all his wealth, is learning a hard lesson about accountability at the moment, for which he is trying to make amends now. By contrast, Tareq and Michael Salahi, the White House party crashers, have not been held fully accountable for their actions and sadly are trying to make a profit off their misdeeds.

The type of accountability John the Baptist demands requires individual self-reflection. It's not something I can do for you from up here in this pulpit. Folks want pastors to be in favor of morality without becoming moralistic. They want the church to speak against sin without getting personal. The story's told about a farmer who was talking to the Lord and said, "If I had a million dollars, Lord, I'd give it to you. If I owned a thousand acres, Lord, I'd turn them over to you." The Lord then said, "Well, how about a pig?" "Take it easy there, Lord; I've got a pig."

If we're going to talk to the Lord, personal accountability will always be part of the conversation. To pray to God for peace means we are also to look for those places lacking peace in our own lives. To pray to God for health means we also are to put down the bottle, put out the cigarette, get out of our chairs, and begin to live more healthily. To pray for racial harmony means we must examine our own racism. To pray for work means we must also ask what keeps us from working. Just as you wouldn't walk into a 12-step meeting and boast about only getting drunk half as often as you used to, John the Baptist accountability isn't satisfied with half answers. John talks about winnowing forks, implements to separate wheat from the dry husks around the grain. One is harvested; one is burnt in fire. They are not meant to be rolled into a spiritual granola and eaten together as part of our religious diet.

More importantly, accountability always moves between close-up shots and seeing the big picture – how we live individually and as a society. Our city has recently mourned the death of a police officer killed in the line of duty; it is right to do so and to acknowledge the debt we owe to all who seek to keep us safe. But shouldn't we also acknowledge the general silence around the tragedy of 78 homicides this year in Pittsburgh, of which over two-thirds are African-Americans, and how there remain steady streams of women and children having to seek refuge in shelters for victims of domestic violence? Our nation is engaged in a debate over health care reform – squabbling over numbers and protecting medical care as a profitable private enterprise, while remaining silent on the fact that, as Americans, we have placed a higher value on

making sure there is no ceiling limiting how high someone can rise in life rather than first providing a floor beneath which no one can sink in life. Our nation is struggling to fight an expensive and unwinnable war in Afghanistan, while remaining silent on the fact that over 90% of the world's heroin now comes from that fractious tribal land; and that in some measure our insistence on criminalizing drug use instead of curing drug use is part of what finances our Afghan enemies in the first place.

John's word for accountability is repentance. We try to soften that word by thinking of repentance as something you do privately before God. But for John, repentance is less about falling to your knees before God, and more about what happens when you get back up again. Repentance is about coming to our senses, about recognizing in full and honest clarity what we've done that we might not have done. Or, as Oscar Wilde has said, repentance is recognizing "that the problem is not what we do but in what we have become."¹

And, to use a sports analogy, true repentance requires follow-through. In sports like golf, baseball, or tennis, you never stop the club, bat or racket right at the point of contact; you have to continue to swing through the ball. From a faith perspective, remorse and repentance are part of the process, but the entire act continues in the follow-through. John the Baptist is always waiting for us there by the shores of the Jordan River. If we come to him for the water of baptism – good; if we come with a contrite heart and a spirit of true repentance – even better. But before we can dry off, John's relentless melody keeps playing right on, asking us about our follow-through, asking us about the good deeds we will do and the changed lives we will now lead as people of the kingdom of heaven. For it is this type of accountable repentance that marks us as people who understand what all the fuss is about during this time of year – people who shudder to imagine God comes near to us in the Christ-child, shudder to think that heaven descends over all people with a light and a justice and a righteousness we have no hope of living up to except by grace and grace alone.

So welcome to the Advent season, in which we unpack our crèches and decorate our trees, knowing full well that as soon as we sit in front of the fireplace and listen to Christmas carols, in the background we'll inevitably hear John the Baptist shouting out his relentless version of holiday cheer. And if, perchance, we are ever driving the Alcan Highway and see John the Baptist hitchhiking from alongside the road, I bet his sign will say this, "Let me tell you who's coming next." And believe me, he actually makes a great companion for the journey ahead.

AMEN

¹Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*; quoted by Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk*, p. 165.