

OPENING:

“MERRY CHRISTMAS YA’ FILTHY ANIMALS!”

So goes the famous line from the 1992 movie *Home Alone 2* and so goes our Gospel reading, where John the Baptist pops out from the Advent Calendar but, instead of delivering a nice chocolate or holiday cheer, screams: ¹

“Repent...the kingdom of God is near... You brood of vipers!”

No wonder that there are so few Advent hymns about John the Baptist, very few devotional practices about him...

because we want to jump ahead to Mary and Joseph and Baby Jesus.

John the Baptist is the person in our lives who shows up, Debbie Downer-style, to splash cold water on this whole holiday affair.

He wants us to wake up! He is the original “woke” (... biblically woke!) ‘Scrooge’ who can ruin a holiday party or dinner at the drop of a hat.

Can you imagine, for example, the dour John the Baptist at a nativity scene?

SIMILARITIES

No, so we want to skip right to Christmas, go past the last 4 verses of *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* and get right to *Silent Night*.

But note, for a moment, all the similarities between Jesus and John the Baptist:

- 1) First off, they were cousins—almost exactly the same age.
- 2) Both usually have been depicted as dressing similarly and having the same general appearance, although we actually don’t know what Jesus looked like.
- 3) They both went into the wilderness to be tested.
- 4) They both were preachers who encouraged others to be baptized.
- 5) They both had bands of loyal disciples.
- 6) Finally, they were both executed by the state for political and religious reasons.

They were so similar that the New Testament stresses their differences as a way of making sure that we don’t confuse them, because apparently people often did.

¹ Podcast “Advent 2A- Stumped” *Strangely Warmed* (November 28, 2022) <https://crackersandgrapejuice.com/advent-2a-stumped/>; Fleming Rutledge. “John the Baptist Points to the Real Hope of Advent.” *Christianity Today* (November 27, 2018). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/december/fleming-rutledge-john-baptist-points-real-hope-advent.html>

DIFFERENCES

Our understanding of them as VERY different people, then, goes like this:

Jesus famously dined with tax collectors and sinners and prostitutes, never missed a chance for a good party.

John the Baptist, meanwhile... we get the sense that he had a lot of meals by his lonesome.

John the Baptist wants repentance, Jesus wants to be your savior.

Jesus was all about hope and forgiveness, John the Baptist was in the wrath and judgement business.

There was once a nun who was very much in the mold of Mother Theresa who had committed her life to helping the poor. She was at a conference in Belgium on the topic of global poverty and after a few days of hard work, the conference leaders decided that the attendees needed to spend a day exploring the city of Brugge to unwind and refresh. So they all took a bus in and looked into the shops and toured around the beautiful city.

The young nun begrudgingly participated in the outing until dinner that night at a nice restaurant. At that point, she said she was fed up, how could they have this luxuriant meal with waiters and silver forks and knives knowing the conditions that the people they served lived in. So, instead of going inside and eating the meal (which was at a Holiday Inn), she stayed in the bus and fumed throughout.

The conference concluded the next day and there was a Eucharist to wrap things up. Everyone was given a chance to speak and our young nun said this:

“I was so miserable (yesterday)... What an insult to the poor... what a waste of time and money... I sat out there on the bus for a long time. Many thoughts ran through my head, and at one stage, I asked myself: ‘Would Jesus be in there eating and drinking and having a good time?’ And I had the horrible realization that he would be! John the Baptist—with his leather belt and his grasshoppers!—would be with me on the bus, boycotting all this joy in the name of the poor.”²

So what do we do with John the Baptist? And with this Advent season of waiting and repentance?

SYNTHESIS

First, we should be careful making this distinction between Jesus and John the Baptist too sharply (that I was just guilty of):

² Rolheiser, Ronald. 2014. *The Holy Longing: the Search for a Christian Spirituality*. Princeton, NJ: Image, 57-59.

because it starts to wander over into the classic error of differentiating between the “Old Testament God” and the “New Testament God” by associating one with mean John the Baptist, the other with nice Jesus, practitioners of Judaism versus enlightened Christians. That’s all a sermon for another day.

But maybe we can hear John the Baptist’s words if we think about Advent in this different way.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that Advent was like being trapped in a mine that had been caved in, where you were losing air and in any belief that you would be rescued, until at some point you hear the sound of pick axes working above you.

That sound of hope is the sound of Advent.

Bonhoeffer writes that Christ “‘is coming to rescue us from the prisons of our existence, from anxiety, from guilt, and from loneliness,’ but to be ready for this rescue, we first have to see how fully we are enslaved.”³

That’s a bit gloomy, again, to be sure, a portrait of a world that maybe is unrecognizable to ours. Do we really consider ourselves to be slaves? To be in prison?

I, for example, am a glass half-full person, an optimist.

The Diocese said we should have “Do not be afraid” as our Stewardship Campaign and we went in a different direction. I love Advent, I love Christmas Cards, I love the sense of anticipation, and I know how the story ends.

But, Jesus did not come in order to say “You guys are doing great.” He was not born into this world as a consecration and congratulations of how great humanity was doing.

So, amid the holiday celebrations, and the constant pressure to succeed, and to consume, and to make things nice, and to have a perfect portrait of Christmas, we need to be reminded that we need Jesus to come into our lives in order to save us.

PARISH

At St. Timothy’s, during this season, we are trying to provide a balance with all this:

We are going to have a marvelous Christmas Pageant and Festival Christmas Eve service on December 24th, I can’t wait. Also, we are going to have a Christmas

³ [Bonhoeffer: Advent Is Like a Prison Cell | Christianity Today](#)

Revels on December 16th of song and laughter, and I have never been, but sounds like it borders on bacchanalian, Dionysian.

At the same time, we will also have a number of opportunities to look at Advent through the lens of John the Baptist. Other churches have “Blue Christmas” or “Longest Night” celebrations. We won’t have that precisely but I would draw your attention to our weekly Wednesday Healing Eucharist. That’s a chance to slow down, to join together in prayer and in healing with your church family. No secret Santa, no holly jolly, just the liturgy and togetherness.

Also, on the 4th Sunday of Advent on December 18th, for our principal service at 10 AM, we will be doing something a little different: we will be having an Advent/Christmas Hymn Festival. This is a service that Todd is spearheading that features seasonal music interspersed with readings from the aforementioned Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian who opposed the Nazi regime during World War II and met martyrdom for his courage and his faith. Bonhoeffer knew from first-hand experience what waiting in a prison was like, and how hope could transform one’s life regardless of the circumstances. So the readings (and the music that day) portray those Advent themes of hope and anticipation and wondering and of being in the dark.

CONCLUSION

Bonhoeffer wrote a letter from prison in 1943 to his parents, it was December, and so Bonhoeffer was singing Christmas carols from his cell, and had constructed an Advent wreath and obscured it from the Nazis.

Bonhoeffer wrote that there was a nativity scene that he kept thinking of, but it was not one that portrayed a tranquil, domestic scene that we are used to.

Rather it shows the Holy Family huddled at the bottom of the painting, while the whole building around them is collapsing. Jesus is being born into ruins of humanity, is under threat from all around him, yet hope endures.⁴

So, of course, we need them both John the Baptist and Jesus.

But we need both, one is good at defining the problem, the other, we proclaim in our creed, is pretty good at the solution.

AMEN

⁴ [Altdorfer Nativity | Faith in the Ordinary](#)