

This week, we continue our Advent journey by meeting two later prophets named John. John the Baptist and John the Theologian were a new generation of prophets during the time of Jesus who journeyed far from their homes to remote places to proclaim messages from God.

**John the Baptist, from the hills of Judea,
went down to the Jordan River.**

The river runs from a beautiful spring of water in northern Israel at Caesarea Phillipi through the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea in the south. John the Baptist was a bridge between the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah last week and the Messiah about to be revealed.

The birth of John answered the prayers of his elderly parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah.

You may remember **Luke's gospel opens with an angel visiting them,** Zechariah, while worshipping as a priest at the Second Temple in Jerusalem, had a vision from the angel Gabriel: he and Elizabeth will have a son. Because he didn't believe he wasn't allowed to talk until John was born. And when John was born, Zechariah was able to speak, and he burst into a song that is called the Benedictus.

Part of it goes You, child (John), will be called a prophet of the Most High for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way. Luke 1:68-70, 76-79

Thirty years later, Zechariah's song unfolded in the prophetic ministry of his son...

In those days, John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea, announcing. " Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!" He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said: The voice of one shouting in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight."

People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him. As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. Matthew 3:1-8, 10-12.

John preached two different sermons to two different audiences. To King Herod, the political authorities, the temple priests

and other religious leaders, John was a thorn in their sides.

He said to them, “ You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives...

Every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire.

To self-satisfied, shortsighted, and selfish souls,
John preached that they were damned.

But for other people, those who were uncomfortable with their lives,
wondering about their priorities and anxious about the future,
he proclaimed that the Messiah foretold by Isaiah had arrived.

I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Mt 3:10-12

And John said when Jesus came to the Jordan seeking to be baptized, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!” John 1:29

There are times during this season when
we need to hear John’s sermon of judgment.

It is easy to wander away from God as we use
our credit cards too much to buy things we
can’t really afford for people who don’t really need them.

We wear ourselves out with crowded calendars.

We stress over finding the perfect gift for someone
while neglecting to buy a warm coat for someone in need.

When we become so focused on the shiny
wrapping paper and the Christmas lights,
but become oblivious to the suffering of people
in our community and our world,
John shouts out to us: Repent!

But even as he preached judgment,
John also offered a message of grace
through his baptizing and urged his listeners
to turn toward God and to start bearing good fruit.

John envisioned that the Messiah was coming soon,
and during Advent, John offers us an opportunity to see Jesus,
acknowledge that we need to straighten our lives out
by turning in a new direction and starting to live holy lives.

Then there was another John.

In the first decades after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus,
the church consisted of only a few thousand believers
in hundreds of congregations scattered around.

All of the apostles and disciples had died.

Jewish and Roman opposition had increased.

And it was during this time that one Christian leader
fled to a small island and continued
the work of John the Baptist, and became
John the Theologian, our next pilgrim guide.

Scholars aren't really sure who this John was.

We do know that John wrote in a cave from Patmos.

A remote island about fifty miles off the western coast of Turkey.

Rocky and arid, an island of only thirteen square miles.

John wrote to Christians in seven small churches in Asia Minor.

Each of these congregations had strengths,
yet each church was in danger of falling away from Jesus Christ.
John's words to the Christians in Laodicea
could describe many Christians today:

I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So
because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I'm about to spit you out of my mouth.

Although both Johns write in very different styles,
their messages resemble each other in their
warnings of the end times and their calls for repentance.

John's vision in Revelation is full of strange symbols
and imagery, cryptic numbers, and scary beasts.

And also, like John the Baptist, John the Theologian
preached a two-part message.

Repent and trust in God's grace.

John was addressing Christians who were lukewarm about their faith.
Christians in every generation, even maybe you
go through the motions of the spiritual disciplines,
but lack commitment.

We talk the talk, but we don't walk the walk.

We decorate our homes and churches for Christmas
but spend little time praying, doing devotionals
and reading the scripture of the season.

We get for ourselves and give to family
but we miss the true message of serving the other.
We live as if Christ will never return
and so we don't feel any need to change.

The great German theologian and martyr
Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this cheap grace.

“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace with Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”

During Advent, both Johns are railing against cheap grace again.
And John says that even in the midst of Merry Christmas,
in no small part because of our lukewarm faith,
humanity allows violence, famine, and death to run rampant.
Wars. Dictators. Children starving. Millions of homeless refugees.
John says we are complicit in these evils
and the fate of Christians who are lukewarm.

And at the climax of John’s vision,

Jesus Christ returns to confront the forces of evil, sin, and death.

And John describes a terrible war between
Christ and the beastly Antichrist Rev 19:19-20.
Christ is victorious on the terrible day of judgment,
the evil spirits and their wicked human
followers are thrown into the fire Rev 20:11-15.

Yet once again, through all the prophets,
judgment is not the end of the story.

John also offered hope through God’s grace.

That a righteous remnant of faithful Christians will be saved.

And John concludes Revelation with a promise
from God made incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Isaiah proclaimed a coming Messiah.

Both Johns saw in their time that Jesus the Messiah
was born in humility to a young mother in an animal stable.

But at the end of time, Jesus Christ now sits victorious
at the right hand of God in the New Jerusalem

and speaks these final words in the Bible from Revelation 22 I am the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. I'm the root and descendant of David...the bright morning star...

John proclaims that God is with us in Jesus Christ.

The persecutors will disappear, and war,
feminine and death will be no more.
The saints who know and love Jesus Christ
will live in a holy city where there is no
darkness, pain, suffering, tears or death.
The reign of Christ is eternal.

Both Johns chastised unfaithful sinners
and comforted fearful, needy people.
Their hearers had a choice: they could either reject God
and face eternal death or accept God's grace,
live faithfully and have eternal life.

And all of this echoed the words of promise God spoke to Isaiah in 41:10 Don't fear, because I am with you; don't be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will surely help you; I will hold you with my righteous strong hand.

John the Baptist and John the Theologian
reveal to us the second part of God's grace
for us as United Methodists.

The justifying power of God.
God's prevenient grace reveals to us our
complacency and self-centeredness, and recognizing
that we have failed and need forgiveness.

Justifying grace offers us forgiveness and a fresh start.

Along our spiritual journeys, there are moments
when God causes us to become discontent
with the place we find ourselves
in our lives and the direction we are going.

We recognize our spiritual darkness and perhaps
question our achievements and values, or wonder
why our usual holiday activities don't
make us merry anymore like they used to.

And once we realize that we have gone
down the wrong path so far,
God's justifying grace opens our eyes to the fact

that we are not the people God created us to be.
Both Johns are calling us to turn
our lives' pilgrimage in a new direction.

This justifying grace, which means to be made right,
might be experienced over a lifetime
or in a single spectacular moment.
But whenever God empowers us to turn
from sin and toward God, Jesus welcomes us and restores us.

**This is what happened to Ebenezer Scrooge
on Christmas morning: he had a rebirth.**

Justifying grace also offers us spiritual assurance
that we have a fresh new start as God's children.
We still need that assurance today.
Like Children on Christmas morning,
who we all know expect gifts,
we become confident that God has not forgotten us.
That we too have received gifts from the Christ child,
Gift of abundant life and life everlasting.

The writers of our book, the Langfords,
tell us that prophetic witnesses can also
be found in Christmas comedy movies,
which makes us laugh, but also calls us to confront
the shortcomings of our own lives.
They show us, ordinary people at their worst,
who ultimately take themselves and us to a better place.

The quintessential example is **Christmas Vacation.**
An ordinary family preparing for Christmas
with a whole bunch of extraordinary experiences.
The film's first line is from a familiar Christmas carol:
O come let us adore them, Christ the lord
but then Jesus disappears from the storyline.
And instead, the focus is on the family's
stressful Christmas preparations.
The father had tried so hard to make the perfect Christmas
yet all his own efforts failed.

In the end, however, all the failed preparations
for Christmas are discovered to be unimportant.
As the movie ends, everything is right in the world again,
and Christmas truly begins despite all the problems and stress.
The movie's message is for us all:

let go of all our efforts to create the perfect Christmas.

That has already happened in the coming of the Christ Child,
Emmanuel, God with us.

Nothing could be more perfect than the Prince of Peace.

And probably in the most incredible Christmas special of all time,
a frustrated Charlie Brown cries out
Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?

**And Linus then proclaims the meaning of Christmas,
standing under a light in the darkness.**

Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you- wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord.

And there is something about the prophet
Linus you might not have noticed.

**When Linus proclaims the meaning of Christmas,
And gets to fear not he lets go of his safety blanket.**

In this season of waiting, watching, and hoping,
are our spirits aligned with the Spirit of God?
We may look cheerful and festive on the outside,
but how are we on the inside?
As we wait for the coming of Christ,
do our thoughts and actions express our love for God?
If we find ourselves far from God,
we can repent and take a new path.
Advent invites us to come out of the darkness and into the light.