

B Advent 3 2025
Saint Barnabas's Church, Falmouth MA
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Mathew 11: 2-11

As we live into the very heart of the Advent season on this 3rd Sunday of Advent, we encounter John the Baptist, Advent's poet laureate

We encounter the eccentric Baptizer who wears camel's hair and eats locusts and wild honey with absolute conviction about his vocation to prepare the way of the Lord

This morning, John the Baptist serves as herald, calling the world to prepare, to wake up, and to grasp the ultimate miracle of God's taking on human flesh to come among us

After several weeks of foreboding, apocalyptic scripture readings, we now begin to feel mounting excitement in the air, the joyful expectation of light that pierces the darkness of our lives

What's at stake in John the Baptizer's proclamation, both for his biblical peers and for you and me today?

Although John explicitly rejects the title of 'prophet' in today's story, he certainly stands with great authority in a long line of heralds, going back at least to Isaiah, today's first scripture lesson, who probably wrote around 450 BC, as a shattered Israel was returning from Exile

Defeated by forces of political hegemony—Israel's own 'safe' assumptions about a covenantal relationship with Yahweh dashed—Isaiah's contemporaries deeply yearned for a new heaven

and a new earth that would overcome the trauma of enslavement and humiliation

Like Isaiah, as we examine our own lives, as we anticipate a new tomorrow yet confront the spiritual and geo-political traumas of the here-and-now, we cry out for a messiah and take comfort that God is in control and will redeem us from both our individual pain and the collective chaos of this world

John the Baptist stands squarely in the middle of this spiritual trajectory, begun so boldly in Isaiah's upbeat prophecy, which—of course—supplies the unforgettable power of Handel's holiday masterpiece

In the midst of Advent, luxuriating in Isaiah's messianic prophecy and the Baptist's witness to the coming of the world's true light, we should ask ourselves the core spiritual question of this season: in spite of all the hoopla, do we really **want** a messiah in the first place?

Of course, it is politically correct to nod favorably and piously at the idea of a freebie savior; it can't hurt, and it may even help

But, as 20th century neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth, argued, perhaps the messiah is exactly the **last** thing we really want:

We want **anything but** salvation, Barth argued, and humankind runs hell-bent away from anything resembling God's intrusion into our well manicured world

When we're brutally honest, perhaps we're ambivalent at best and we should admit that we don't want a full-time messiah, especially one that comes on terms we have not negotiated

A quick gaze around our culture betrays the enduring fantasy of a totem messiah, a small household god that we could keep next to our bedside or, perhaps, in our back pocket, like a talisman against life's misfortunes

This assumption fueled Sigmund Freud's valid critique of what passed for religion in his own day: Freud argued that humanity used God as a Rorschach inkblot onto which we could project our infantile fears, but then ignore the Rorschach god whenever we felt on top of our game

Freud's insight parallels that of John the Baptist: totem religion—infantile fantasies that ward off frightening stuff—is not the light; the light of the world redeems our human brokenness and fear, but it also goes far beyond it, calling us to self-transcendence and service to God's world

In this spirit, we move beyond a talisman messiah, we cast off the darkness of self-help bromides, we wake up, become fully alive and prepare to greet the Messiah who is born in Bethlehem, dies and rises for our sake

Such, my friends, is the very miracle of the incarnation that we will celebrate at Christmas

We don't negotiate the terms of the Messiah's coming, nor of his redeeming our world, but we do wake up and prepare ourselves for the wonderful consequences of his coming

This coming, this Good News, stands as the core of our Christian proclamation, our miraculous expectation, our witness to God's free gift to this world

John the Baptist rejects an idolatrous, talisman notion of the messiah and embraces the victory of God's initiative and redeeming love over our neurotic human fantasies

The one who comes after John, the one whose thong he is not worthy to untie, is no tribal house-god—to be brought out in times of trouble

Rather, creation's messiah embodies nothing less than the very light of the world

You will find more basic image of God's claiming this world, no more fundamental sign of God's revelation than the very notion of **light** itself

Light/dark, god/no god: the Baptizer declares that Christ comes as the source of illumination that pierces the dark nooks and crannies of our souls, a deeply hopeful vision that we all need as a chaotic year comes to its end

Yet, a sleeper dimension of John the Baptist's witness proclaims that the Savior of the world already lives, but the world knows him not

Especially when we read it just before Christmas, a new student of scripture could mistakenly assume that John the Baptist is a generation older than Jesus and that adult Baptist is announcing our Lord's pending birth

But the scriptural witness, deepened by centuries of Christian commentary, proclaims that John is but six months older than his divine cousin

In fact, in Luke's Gospel, which we will study in detail on Wednesday morning, the angel Gabriel announces the conceptions of both Elizabeth and Mary, who share intimate prenatal stories as babes leap for joy in their wombs

John the Baptist announces that the messiah already has entered the world and has come of age; it remains our simple task to recognize and acknowledge his lordship

Everyone likes a good party, and celebrating the birth of the historic Jesus is pretty straight-forward

But in the midst of Advent, John calls us to deeper spiritual reflection

How do you recognize the Savior who already stands in your very midst? Beyond lip service, what homage do you pay to God incarnate?

John's call to repentance taps more deeply into the mysterious reality of God's coming among us

John calls us to turn away from our personal obsessions and our self-help bromides to bear witness to divine light and to tap into its holy, mysterious, healing power

John the Baptist's messiah is no well-intended role model, but the very *logos*, God's incarnate Word who has existed since before creation and who now takes on human flesh to dwell among us, to experience our condition and redeem it with his redemptive, life-giving power

John calls us not to save the world but to let go of our foolish ways and witness to the in-breaking of God in the world around us

As we tap into God's invasion of this world—an invasion most quintessentially embodied in Bethlehem, yet occurring with every breath we take—we let our false beliefs surface, we begin to trust that God's world is orderly and just, we break out of our loneliness, we

begin to celebrate that we are part of something really big, really holy, really joyous

As Christians who embrace this Good News and—in the spirit of John the Baptist—herald it to the world, we participate with one another in the very body of Christ—not the idealized, airy fairy body, but the gritty, broken/redeemed body of Christ bequeathed to us by God

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Pretty powerful stuff

I invite you to this conversation amid this holy season—as long as you are open to a few surprises along the way—but I do it in the spirit of one John the Baptist, who witnesses to the wondrous, majestic majesty of God in Christ, the redeemer for whom we are unworthy to untie the thong of his sandal