

## JOHN THE BAPTIST

LUKE 3: 1-6

John – bless his heart. Look at him.

Not Christmas card material is he?

On this second Sunday of Advent, when we light a candle for peace it *could* deteriorate into chubby fluffy angels and lily white doves and angels choirs in perfect 4 part harmony sweetly singing peace on earth.

Instead what we get is John – yelling his head off in the wilderness.

I said last week and it's true again today – this is no baby shower we're preparing for. Something BIG is going on. Last week Luke told us to lift up our heads...to look up. In language that was cosmic and apocalyptic he invites us to take the long view and to wait with urgent patience for what God has prepared....and to be prepared because whatever it is, it's going to shake up the world.

It was a wake up call....a tug away from fake tinsel and lights – a wake up call to look at the signs all around us. To see where God is working, bringing to birth a new creation.

And in case we got that wake up call and then rolled over and hit the snooze button, today's reading is like an elbow in the ribs...John, with locust breath and wild fire in his eyes, right in our face, saying “Get up and get going NOW!”

When he says “Look up, and look around” he's calling for eyes open. Off with the rose coloured glasses and an honest brave look at who we are – and what's going on in this world.

Being with John is like having the freezing wear off after you've been to the dentist. You get to see what is really happening. We start to feel the pain of the world. Some in the Biblical tradition, when faced with the pain and injustice in the world, bear it with patience, knowing that God is suffering too.

Not John. He's angry and he's of the prophetic tradition that says “DO something about it!” At one level it's very simple. If you are going in a direction that does not honour God then – turn around! Turn around. That's the literal translation of the word repent. Turn around. This is not rocket science, people – if someone is cold and you have two coats.....?????

If some are obscenely rich and others starving....

John is calling the people back to their own best selves. To who they know themselves to be deep in their hearts, or KNEW themselves to be before the world as it is rained hardships down on them so hard they'd lowered their eyes, bowed their heads until they could no longer see the sun, see one another, see the way ahead.

He's calling them back. Back to the vision, back to the sun. Look up – he says. Look up! You may be beaten down but you can look up. You are stronger than despair. You are bigger than what is trying its best to keep you down. Look up – the way we're going is leading nowhere. Turn this thing around and let's get going.

I'm sure I've said this before but you can't look at John without knowing a couple of things:

*First, it's about what he was doing out there at the Jordan. By this time in the life of the country, the only place where Jews could legally offer sacrifice, was Jerusalem, and its services were expensive. The ordinary peasant eking out a living in the fields or on the sea simply could not travel to the capital to make the required sacrifices and attend the obligatory religious festivals. What John did was to introduce a new, inexpensive generally available, divinely authorized rite, effective for the remission of all sins. This was his great invention. Prophets had been warning of a coming judgement for centuries. The new thing was the assurance that there was something that the average person could do about it; could do to prepare.*

The second thing is about WHERE he takes them. He knows what he's doing – this man is a man of tradition – he grew up with priests for parents, he knows the stories and the vision of his people. So picture this: in going to John for baptism, people had to cross into the Jordan, then back again into the land.

THAT IS EXODUS LANGUAGE. That is the imagery and action that touch the Jewish soul in its deepest place. Whatever else his baptism meant to them, even the most illiterate or untempled Jew would know in her or his bones the stories of the exodus. It would be as though someone took US out into a barn where there was a star and a newborn baby and shepherds. You can't miss it. It's screaming at you “SOMETHING BIG IS GOING ON HERE”

John is physically enacting their story – he is preparing a conquered people to re-enter and reclaim the Promised Land.

NO WONDER he made the powers that be nervous.

He calls us to do the same. This land, this world is a gift to us – ALL OF US – from our Creator. It's time to lift our heads, cross the Jordan and claim it again in the name of the One who created it. Claim it for those from whom it has been wrenched. Claim it in the name of peace and wholeness and dignity for all its creatures. The waters of the Jordan quench the thirst of those who long for justice and righteousness; the waters nourish the roots, preparing the way for the fruit of peace and hope in a world that currently seems like a barren branch.

Bless his heart, we need prophets like John. Passionate, angry heralds of the future – those who care so deeply that they become consumed with their passion – we need them.

And we've had prophets like that through history....like who?

And bless their hearts, often they are dismissed – the consuming passion of their hearts made the butt of jokes over bagels at Tim's and on late night talk shows. And often as well, they end up burning up, or out, and we can find them on park benches or on prozac or in psychiatric wings. Bless them. All of them. They're hard to be around. And we need them. Badly.

Today John is inviting us to lift our heads. See – really see – what's going on. Stand up straight and not stoop to the moral shabbiness that keeps our eyes darting from one inconsequential thing to another. Stand up straight and lift out heads....because the substance of our hope is persistent, unyielding and grounded.