

Year A, 2016
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Advent 2
St. Matthew 3:1-12

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

He goes by many names: John the Baptist, John the Baptizer, “Jack the Dipper.” Somewhere, in history, a bunch of seminarians named him that last one in the hope that it would add some humor to all the humorless accounts of John the Baptist. It didn’t work and there’s very little humor here. For here we are on the edge of Christmas and Matthew drags us out to the edge of the wilderness to meet a loud, uncouth scolder. He’s dressed in clothing a thrift store wouldn’t even sell—a camel hair outer garment held together by a leather belt. My guess is he wore that hair shirt inside out in order to cause himself discomfort. Ascetics seem to think that physical pain is the best way to subdue the physical and emphasize the spiritual. And to top off the show he carried a bag of locust and honey trail-mix with him. But, when he lifted his face and began to speak, every ear in the place was on him.

John seems to be just plain rude. When gentiles converted to Judaism they had to go through a ritual washing—a baptism. Well, one would expect that for polluted pagans. But John tells his people—God’s chosen people—that they’re no better off than the pagans. They need to repent, confess their sins and get washed up. And he had no respect for the leaders, either. The Sadducees were the Jerusalem “establishment.” They ran the Temple (which was the heart of Jewish life) and were men of financial means. They were the Orthodox of their day. They expected respect. John tells them that they’re nothing but a brood of vipers. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were a group of laymen who sought to center the religious life of the people in the synagogue and home—a noble idea. They were the conservatives of their day. They lived very disciplined lives strictly following every letter of the Law. John warned them that they ought to flee from the wrath that is surely coming their way. They need, he told them, to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

There’s a lot that John got wrong. He demanded repentance but didn’t mention forgiveness and grace. He warned them that the “one who is more powerful than I” was coming with apocalyptic judgment. The ax is already out and waiting to fell the trees that do not bear good fruit. Like a

farmer at the end of the harvest, the coming One, he told them, will toss the wheat into the air so that the lighter chaff—the skins and stalks that surround the grain—will be blown away and the grain fall to the threshing floor. The grain will be stored and the chaff will be gathered as fuel for burning. The One he was pointing to, however, came not with judgment and wrath, but with love and forgiveness. John got a lot wrong.

But there was much that John got right. I learned early on, probably from my mother, that the key to successful entertaining is to have a clean house and a straightened up living room. If that room isn't neat and tidy, that's what all your guests will remember. Every Saturday morning at college, in the dorm, I would pull out the bucket and mop and wash and wax my floor whether it needed it or not. By the time I finished, I would have a crowd of amazed fellow students standing in the doorway watching. John would say, that's a good start but there's more to be done. Getting ready for the coming of Christ into the world or into our lives requires more than just scouring the floor and tidying up the room. It will require an outer *and* inner housecleaning. Repent, John demanded. Live ethically, John warned. That's not simply a matter of moving the furniture. It means turning around and heading in a completely new direction. John got that right.

He also proclaimed (as did Jesus) that the Kingdom of God was at hand. To get an idea of what he meant by that Kingdom, we need to go to the first lesson for today, Isaiah. John had the ax lying at the root of the trees ready to strike. Isaiah has the trees already felled, but then he promises something amazing: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse. . . . With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth." That's the Kingdom John tells us is close at hand. That is what Advent waiting is waiting for: the peaceable kingdom where "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as waters cover the sea."

John knew it took more than a simple decision to act right and to ready oneself. It took a transformation of the heart and of the mind. It took ridding oneself of the chaff and the sins which cling so closely; it took a trampling down of the old way of life to allow for the new to sprout and to grow. And that's from top to the bottom—from the king and all the

institutions of society, to the poor and dispossessed.

That's the kind of thing that got the Baptizer worked up. For there is One who is coming ... not to trample down and to judge, but to sanctify and make holy. To make our lives holy through baptism, forgiveness and grace; our romantic lives holy through marriage; our social lives holy through peacemaking; our institutions sanctified by the justice of God; and our holiness sustained by the bread of heaven.

Perhaps that ought to get us worked up, too. Amen.