

Why so angry?

Don't you know you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar?

What happened to make you this way?

Prophets are so misunderstood.

The Isaiahs and John the Baptists of the world would love nothing more than to stop being angry. The problem is that they are awake and aware. They see what's going on and can't believe no one else is noticing. They have a vision for the future that compels them to believe and act differently than the status quo. And, they know time is fleeting.

Prophets seem to be the antithesis of Advent. We're all in quiet Advent expectation mode and they are saying – what are you doing sitting there doing nothing? 'Tis a puzzlement.

Allow me to posit a theory: these prophets aren't so much angry as they are more ready to get to the reality of the reign of God.

They are so focused on the vision of a world where children and animals, even those who prey on each other, can live together without violence. They are focused on lives transformed by repentance and forgiveness, which is the first step to such a world order.

What they are not about is a photo op or a viral social media moment.

Isaiah reaches deep into the tradition that an ancestor of David will come to bring justice to the land. What we hear in today's reading is the calm after a storm of verses summoning death and destruction of Judah from the Assyrians. Prior to this passage, Isaiah was hardly all sweetness, light, and optimism. After the awfulness, Isaiah says, an anointed one will lead the people into a changed world, which will require changed hearts to live in it.

John picks up the baton passed by Isaiah. He understands that a change of heart requires a cleansed heart. Preparing for a royal guest means clearing the pathways, leveling the grade, making sure the space is open for the arrival.

This invitation for repentance – for turning one’s life around – is being made at the edge of society. There the poor, the humble, the unimportant people hear about someone who is to come. That someone will take what keeps the people from knowing God and make it disappear. The message of God’s love and forgiveness is given to the people whom the powerful ignore. And John knows there are so much more who are ignored than who ignore.

That’s why the Sadducees and the Pharisees made their way to the river. John’s message was drawing great crowds. What was he doing that they weren’t doing? They just had to go see. Maybe if they get close enough, they could be a part of this phenomenon. John wanted none of them.

“You sons of snakes,” John cries out.

John didn’t just insult them; he insulted their parentage. That was a big no-no in the ancient world. And, then he goes on. At this point, switching to The Message paraphrase is extremely helpful. Here’s what Eugene Petersen’s take on the whole exchange sounds like:

*What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to make any difference? It's your life that must change, not your skin! And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as father. Being a descendant of Abraham is neither here nor there. Descendants of Abraham are a dime a dozen. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire.*

*"I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. The real action comes next: The main character in this drama—compared to him I'm a mere stagehand—will ignite the kingdom life within you, a fire within you, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He's going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned."*

Who is John the Baptist in our day? Who is the one who speaks truth to power?

Who is willing to be labeled 'angry' in order to show others the path to life?

We – you and I – are the John the Baptists of our day.

We need only remember what John the Baptist's did:

Invite people into a changed life. Help them clear away anything that is keeping them from welcoming the anointed one into relationship with them. If you are not on the margins of society, go there.

We don't have to travel far. Within the homes on these suburban streets are people living with addiction, disability, physical and mental illness, domestic violence, and loneliness. Some have been damaged by churches. Most don't trust organized religion. Despite this, many long to hear the invitation to bathe themselves in holy waters, be cleansed, and begin life anew.

Can you make that invitation to your neighbors? Okay, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord" may not be the best language. Perhaps the invitation goes something like this:

Come with me to Advent Lessons and Carols tonight. It will do your soul good.

Or

My church is full of loving people, why don't you join me this week for services.

Or

We have a healing service once a month, would you like to be a part of that?

Or

My youth group is going caroling on Wednesday, want to come along?

Before John could do any baptizing, people had to get to the river. Someone had to invite them down. Then, the message of love and forgiveness could be delivered. Then, the people themselves could choose to repent and turn toward a new life.

Together then, those of us who are here and those whom God will bring to us, will await the one whose sandal John dared not tie, but whose arrival into humble human flesh has changed the world.

Amen.