

Advent 3: The Messenger and the Message

Ruth Haley Barton

“The house of my soul is too narrow for Thee to come in; let it be enlarged by Thee. It is in ruins. Do Thou restore it.” -Augustine

In this week’s Gospel reading (Luke 3:7-18), John the Baptist is on a rant. I guess we could describe it more delicately by calling it a prophetic message but really—any sermon that starts out by calling its listeners a brood of vipers is in a category all its own!

The people have come to be baptized and in most religious settings this is a tender and very solemn thing. A baptism is an occasion for celebration that often includes an uplifting, encouraging message delivered with some sensitivity to the variety of family and friends who might be gathered. But John seems to have missed his cue; he starts out by addressing the group in harsh, combative terms and questioning why they came. Then with very little segue, he moves to the instruction, “Bear fruit worthy of repentance.” It’s an inspiring thought, but then he becomes threatening again and warns them of utter annihilation if they don’t get with the program he is describing. “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees,” he says. “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (v. 9)

This message isn’t seeker-friendly, seeker-sensitive or even serious-Church-goer friendly! It’s not finely nuanced for the various target audiences, nor is it even all that carefully crafted by our standards. But here’s the thing: the crowd is eating it up! They actually lean in closer and ask, “What then should we do?” And what transpires is a very lively and intensely practical conversation about how John’s message applies specifically

to the different people groupings in the crowd. Rich people, tax collectors, soldiers...it's a brave question but they really want to know. *What then shall we do?*

So John goes on to describe repentance in very concrete terms. He challenges them with the idea that repentance is more than just feeling badly about our sins in a private sort of way. He says there are fruits associated with repentance that should be evident in the rough and tumble of real life. If we have two coats (a sign of affluence and material wealth), repentance involves sharing what we have. If we deal with other people's money and finances, we need to become more honest and fair. If we are a soldier fighting for peace or a public servant representing the government, we are to use our position for the good of others rather than using it to gain more for ourselves.

Great Expectations

The most surprising result of this hard-hitting conversation is that the people are *filled with expectation!* Rather than dismissing John because of his rough, unpolished exterior and his incriminating message, their hearts are strangely moved. What they are hearing resonates with such truth that they start to wonder if he is the Messiah! Their humility and receptivity prepares them to receive the deepest heart of John's message which is where the real hope lies. *"One who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."* But, again, the message is not unequivocally positive. *"His winnowing fork is in his hand,"* John goes on to say, *"to clear his threshing floor and to gather wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."* (Luke 3:16, 17) He is still not letting them off the hook!

So how did John do this? How was he able to bring a message of judgment and repentance and have people experience it as good news? (vs. 18) I'm not sure any of the rest of us could have gotten away with it!

Here's my thought: John had been in the wilderness (Luke 3:2) and really good things happen to people in the wilderness, spiritually speaking. Hard things but good things. The wilderness is a place of great paradox, as Alan Jones points out. "The desert wilderness is the place where nothing grows and our very existence is threatened. Yet it is also the arena especially chosen by God as the focus of his revelation. This is a desert of spirit: a place of silence, waiting, conversion and transformation. A true revelation is a very disturbing event because it demands a response; and to respond to it means some kind of inner revolution. It involves being 'made over,' being made new, being 'born again.' The desert, then, is a place of revelation and revolution. In the desert we wait, we weep, we learn to live."¹

Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing

The message that emerged from John's wilderness experience was unsettling, compelling, convicting and hopeful all at the same time. The reason he was able to pull it off was because of where he had been and how the message came. *The word of God came to John in the wilderness*, the Scriptures tell us, and *he himself*, had been made over, made new, born again by it. Like all those who seek God in the wilderness, he had experienced the desert as frontier territory—not only geographically but also spiritually. He knew, as Augustine did, that the soul in its natural state is not ready to receive what we think we are ready for. In its natural state the soul is too narrow and *too crowded with*

all that is not God for God to actually come in and take up residence. In the desert experiences of our lives, the decks are cleared for spiritual action, the “house” of our soul is enlarged for a true visitation, and we cry out for the kind of restoration only God can accomplish. *“The house of my soul is too narrow for Thee to come in; let it be enlarged by Thee. It is in ruins. Do Thou restore it.”*

People who are spiritually hungry and looking for spiritual nourishment recognize the real thing when they see it. They recognize a message that is anointed because the messenger has been purged and prepared by his or her own encounters with God in the wilderness. They experience this kind of message as being somehow different than the sentimental fluff and self-help tidbits that are our usual fare. As challenging as John’s message was, he embodied what he was preaching so powerfully that the people recognized it as being the only path to real hope. It rang true in a whole different way than what they were hearing inside the banalities of organized religion.

Fashioning Our Own Desert

These are busy days for those of us who are in ministry. Insanely so, if we are honest. Few of us will have the luxury of running off to the desert to prepare the messages required of us this season. But Henri Nouwen offers us this admonition relative to our situation. “We have to fashion our own desert where we can withdraw every day, shake off our compulsions, and dwell in the gentle healing presence of our Lord. Without such a desert we will lose our own soul while preaching the gospel to others. But with such a spiritual abode, we will become increasingly conformed to him in whose Name we minister.”²

Can we as spiritual leaders do at least that much this season? Can we at least fashion a little desert time every day so that our souls can be enlarged, so that the debris can be cleared away, and our ruined places restored? The other readings for this week tell us what we might expect during such times. Zephaniah 3 tells us we can expect to encounter a God who rejoices over us with gladness...a God who is waiting to renew us in love. Isaiah describes a deep well of salvation from which our souls can draw. And Philippians 4 assures us that God is near.

During Advent I have been waking up earlier than usual, unable to go back to sleep. At first this concerned me, given the demanding nature of these days. But eventually I realized, like the little boy Samuel, that it was God himself who was waking me up, wanting to love on me a little more than usual during this demanding season. As we sit together in the quiet of the early morning, he just wants me to know that he is near. As the light creeps up on the darkness, he wants me to hear him rejoicing over me. He wants to renew me with his love. He wants me to hear him singing over me with gladness. Before the tasks and responsibilities of the day press in, he wants me to draw deep from the wells of salvation.

Advent is a season of longing, yes, but it is just as much about God's longing for us as it is about our longing for him. He doesn't want to wait until December 26 when all the preaching, planning and shopping is done to be intimate with us. He is longing for us now, in these busy days. He wants to be intimate with us now, even when it seems impossible. He wants the sweetness and the strength that comes from those encounters to carry us through our days. He wants *us* to hear and know the good news deep in our own souls even as we are proclaiming it to others.

¹ Alan Jones, *Soul Making: The Desert Way of Spirituality* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), p. 5,6.

² Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1981), p. 30, 31.

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