

## John the Baptist

Listening to John the Baptist you'd have to conclude that God is one angry dude.

When John lambasts the Pharisees and Sadducees, it's as if he's lambasting the Democrats in the Senate and the Republicans in the House, because, you see, the Sadducees and Pharisees agree about as often as our Democrats and Republicans, meaning almost never.

So John's scorched earth warnings cut across the whole field: whether you're on the right or the left, you're in big trouble, John seems to be saying.

It seems that John is anticipating the Messiah, but he's also anticipating a certain kind of Messiah.

Like the prophets of old, John is writing the book that might be entitled: "Straighten Up And Fly Right!"

All four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, tell the story of John the Baptist, so you know he was and is an important fellow in our faith.

Today we hear Matthew's take on John the Baptizer, and it's here that the powers-that-be are compared to dangerous snakes, and God's ability to make children even from stones is announced loud and clear.

On the other hand, when we listen in on Luke's gospel, we learn that when the crowd asks what they need to do, John gives some pretty straight forward ethics to live by:

"Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

When the corrupt tax collectors cringe and ask "what should we do?," John tells them:

"Don't collect any more than you are required to;"

and to the soldiers he says:

"Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

Good rules to live by, don't you think?

And John is expecting a Messiah who will lay down rules like these, only more so.

Except that John, when it comes to what Jesus is like, has it wrong.

Not that we can afford to be tough on John; after all, we all tend to get Jesus wrong most of the time.

A Messiah who's job it is to lay down rules is actually the kind of Messiah that not only John wants, but that's the Messiah we want too!

If we can just have some rules to follow, we can stay in control; we know the lay of the land, we know what's expected, except that Jesus is having none of it.

The Messiah John is expecting has an axe poised at the root of every Pharisee and Sadducee, at every Democrat and Republican, at every last one of you and me.

John's Messiah seems to be all about getting holy or getting burned forever —  
John's Messiah seems to be one angry dude!

So John doesn't see it coming when the actual Messiah walks away from fire and brimstone and walks toward each and every one of us, with arms extended, forgiving sins without even being asked to; forgiving sins before there is even an expression of remorse or contrition; forgiving all that is broken in us, Pharisees and Sadducees, Democrats and Republicans alike, simply because that is the nature of the true Messiah.

Love and mercy and kindness; all rooted in a profound radical trust in the Living God, these, it turns out, are the marks of the Messiah.

So stunned by this Messiah is John that when he's locked up by King Herod, John sends his own disciples to Jesus, carrying with them one question that John desperately needs to know the answer to:

"Are you the one, or are we waiting for another?"

John doesn't see it coming when it turns out that the axe is not poised to be swung by God against us; but rather it's poised to be swung by us against Jesus, and therefore, by us against God.

It's not God who's doing the chopping, it's us.

It's not God who has a thing for violence, it's us.

As it turns out, God is not an angry dude after all, not the violent God we so often wish we had (because God's violence can justify our own violence); but as the life, suffering and death of Jesus reveal, God is the victim of our violent ways, and in God's messiah, God submits to our violence, so that in the submitting, he might break the fever of our love affair with violence — forever.

So John doesn't see it coming when the one who is consigned to be torn apart on the threshing floors — is Jesus — and so often, we don't we see it coming either.

John has a vision of God's refining fire, but what he cannot imagine is that God's refining fire, through Jesus, comes not through condemnation, not through guilt, or rejection; but astoundingly, the refining fire of Jesus burns with compassion; it engulfs with forgiveness; it consumes with mercy.

And perhaps this is why Jesus says later of John that while he is the greatest of all the Prophets, even the least person in the Kingdom of God is greater than John — because one who finds a home in the Kingdom of God has come to embrace the compassion, the forgiveness, and the mercy that defines God's reign.

Nelson Mandela, who died at 95 last Thursday, exemplifies this kind of life.

Mr. Mandela was a fighter against the evil Apartheid system that began in South Africa "in the 1940's, when the Afrikaner National Party was able to gain a strong majority in the national government.

That party invented apartheid as a means to cement their control over the economic and social system.

Initially, the aim of apartheid was to maintain white domination while extending racial separation.

With the enactment of apartheid laws in 1948, racial discrimination was institutionalized.

Starting in the 1960's, a plan of "Grand Apartheid" was executed, emphasizing territorial separation and police repression.

Race laws touched every aspect of social life, including a prohibition of marriage between non-whites and whites, and the sanctioning of "white-only" jobs.

In 1950, the Population Registration Act required that all South Africans be racially classified into one of three categories: white, black (African), or colored (of mixed descent).” Internet, History of Apartheid.

Mr. Mandela fought against this evil system and was arrested and jailed, usually in solitary confinement, for some 27 years.

Imagine that.

Twenty-seven years, largely alone, cut off from wife and children, friends and neighbors.

Twenty-seven years.

You’d think it would make him hate, make him bitter, make him bent on revenge.

But it didn’t happen that way, no, not at all.

When he was finally released in 1990, he peacefully negotiated the end of this racist system and in 1994, he was elected the president of South Africa.

Now, there was plenty of pressure on Mr. Mandela to return the favors of hatred and violence that whites inflicted on blacks – but Mandela rejected that course.

Instead, he and our own Anglican Archbishop, Desmond Tutu, established an ingenious and remarkable alternative: called the Commission on Truth and Reconciliation, where those who had arrested and tortured and killed and those who were the victims of arrest and torture, and the families of those killed, could come together – the guilty to express their sorrow and regret; the aggrieved to forgive – and what was expected to be a cauldron of violent revenge in South Africa largely gave way to peaceful reconciliation.

Why speak of any of this today, this second Sunday of the Advent season?

Because all that God gives to us in Jesus has to do with the here and now; all that God gives to us in Jesus has to do with how we live our common lives, not only in our immediate families or immediate communities but as citizens of this one world, because Jesus is given as God’s gift to all of humanity.

The shining example of Mr. Mandela’s life, of Archbishop Tutu’s life, of the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, and of all those, whether perpetrator or victim,

who humbled themselves to participate - this is the reconciling work of Jesus in action in our world today.

The consuming fire of Jesus does not seek human damnation, but rather it seeks to burn away that within each of us that is stubborn or prideful or unforgiving or determined to maintain our position.

The consuming fire of Jesus burns the the chaff until it is finished – leaving behind only the good wheat, the forgiving heart, the reconciling mind, ready to participate, here and now, in our life today, in the endless mercy of God.

And who is this God but the one praised by our psalmist today?

“He shall defend the needy among the people;

He shall live as long as the sun and moon endure,

He shall come down like rain upon the mown field,

In his time shall the righteous flourish;  
there shall be abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more.

Blessed be the Lord GOD, the God of Israel,  
who alone does wondrous deeds!

And blessed be his glorious Name for ever!

Amen. Amen.”