

Wild Locusts and Big Macs

My 16 year old daughter is a deep and thoughtful young woman, and when she comments to me about how tough it is sometimes to understand our worship service, how dry the words often seem, how strange some of the hymns are, these are questions that get me thinking about the nature of our worship and the nature of our particular tradition.

And there's probably no better time to reflect on such questions than when we come face to face with locust eating John the Baptist, who brings strange words to all who will listen on the banks of the Jordan.

Why does our liturgy use such strange words and why can it feel so hard to wrap one's head around?

Why, in other words, for more than a few people, might our worship service feel more like eating locusts rather than eating something sweet?

Certainly there are others who have jazzed up their music and simplified the gospel....places like New Hope and other sorts of evangelicals come to mind.... so that worshipping there tastes more like Big Macs than locusts....

But if faith is a journey into the ultimate mystery of all that is, an expedition that slowly takes us ever deeper into True Reality, with a capital T and a capital R, and if the purpose of this journey is to transform us from who we are into who we are meant to become – then you just don't get there in a way that's easy or simple or painless.

Who wants to actually admit that she is powerless over the course and content and length of her life?

Who wants to surrender to a power greater than himself, acknowledging that his own best thinking usually results in train wrecks and wars and in-law hating and anxiety and fear?

Who wants to look deeply at one's deeply personal flaws and defects of character, much less admit them out loud to another flawed human being?

And yet, these are the steps necessary to make your way into the deep end of life.

They are steps that many find too frightening to even think about, leaving them stuck in the shallow end of life's pool, full of easy words and sentimental music.

In the shallow end, you get a faith that looks not like John in the wilderness or Jesus on the cross, but something like the Rev Billy Bob with his big hair and giant diamond rings...who's often selling a faith that rails against abortion and gay marriage but utterly fails to get to what John is preaching in the desert, to what Jesus accomplishes by dying on the cross: a faith that moves us into a life of service, of forgiveness, of non-violence, of looking out for the most vulnerable among us, of developing a willingness to die rather than kill.

The sad fact is that Christianity has been so dumbed down that for far too many people it simply means accepting Jesus as your personal savior (in evangelical circles) or following the rules just enough to get by (in orthodox and liturgical circles).

And so, our liturgy, our hymns and prayers, are quite deliberately designed to take us to the deep end of life's pool - and Advent is the perfect time of the year to journey into that sometimes foreign, sometimes frightening, place.

And there is this too.

Our faith is not simply, or even primarily, a call to us as individuals.

It is almost always a call to us as a people, a community, a family.

And truth be told, the people of America today, much like the people of Israel in John's day, are longing for a messiah.

Israel had a series of false messiahs, one that resulted in the Romans crucifying over 6000 people when Jesus was just a boy.

And here at home, people of all political persuasions are settling in with the notion of President-elect Trump; who, as a candidate, often evoked messianic talk, as in: "I am the only one who can fix your problems!"

He won a significant majority of the so-called Christian vote, over 80% of white evangelicals are in his camp.

We human beings are suckers for anyone who promises to remove pain or fear or uncertainty or anxiety.

We are suckers for leaders who promise to purify the culture, or the race, or the community.

We are suckers for those who promise to return to a golden past, even though such a past never actually existed.

So this second week of Advent, let's remember once again what and who the true messiah looks like.

The truth is, Jesus doesn't remove fear and anxiety or pain or uncertainty.

You need only look at the life he lived and the life he invites us to follow in: there is plenty of all those things.

No, Jesus doesn't promise that we will avoid such things; he promises us the grace to endure them, the faith to be transformed by them, the hope that we will, not in spite of these difficulties but because of them, be made into something new.

The true messiah does not ask us to shrink our world view or to find reasons to exclude those who are different from us.

The true messiah is constantly challenging us to open ourselves to all of God's good creation — particularly to our fellow human beings — to remember that walking before every human person, those we love and those we hate, is an angel announcing: "Make way for the image of God! Make way for the image of God!"

False messiahs seek out scapegoats to foist all of society's problems upon — promising that once we drive them out — all will be well.

The true messiah, and all who follow him in faith, becomes the scapegoat — willingly taking on the sin of the community, as enemies are forgiven, cheeks turned to endure another blow, with violence never returned in kind.

In this season, and in these times in particular, it is imperative that we reach out to our fellow Christians, no matter our traditions or denominations, and rededicate ourselves to the truth that "God's gift of salvation and forgiveness and hope is not a possession, it is a task." Hauerwas, Matthew, 47. Paraphrase.

May we all of us come to see that God not only raises up children of Abraham from stones, "but that God raises up children who once had hearts of stone, including mine, including yours!" Id.

"Which is cause for great hope as we explore the deep end of this odd place known as The kingdom of God.

This odd kingdom where the first will be last and the last first.

This strange locale where the poor, the imprisoned and their victims, the dead by capital punishment, the sick, the lonely, the disenfranchised, the victims of racism and prejudice, they will be honored guests of God's kingdom, where the wolf and the lamb lie down together, and swords are beat into plowshares, where pedigree and class and social standing counts for nothing.

This is the gospel of Jesus Christ, which says to us in no uncertain terms:

Only when you love the last, the least, the lost, the forgotten, can you participate in the kingdom of heaven." T. Kimbrough, Preaching, 3 (paraphrased).

When we live this way, we slowly come to understand that the anonymous life teaching children in the inner city is of far more value than having your mug on the cover of People Magazine, that handing out breakfast to the houseless counts way more in God's eyes than pulling down a six figure income, and that we don't do these things because **we** are good or kind or virtuous but because God is.

And while this way of life, especially at the beginning, tastes more like locusts than Big Macs, if you stick around long enough, the locusts, lo and behold, dissolve into the world's sweetest honey.

And that, my friends, is worth hanging around to be a part of!

At least it is for me..... 😊

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