

SLD12.16.07 3rd Advent
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 3: 1-12
Jill Oglesby Evans

Letters From An Onlooker

According to lectionary, last Sunday, the second Sunday in Advent was meant to focus on the person and ministry of John the Baptist. Instead we got to enjoy the choir's wonderful, marvelous, exquisite, and categorically delightful performance of Vivaldi's Gloria. But guess what. The Baptist's still hanging around waiting to be noticed. I just couldn't get him to go away.

This is not a fortunate circumstance, for the rantings and ravings of the wooly, wild-eyed Baptist are invariably hard to take, especially during this season of hope, light and goodwill. John's focus and style seems harsh and out of place in this warmly lit and beautifully decorated sanctuary. But apparently, even in the midst of the wreaths and bows and candle light that herald the coming of the Christ child, we're meant to make room in our Advent imaginations for the dark, demanding person and personality of the Baptist.

So I thought it might be helpful for us this morning to hear from one who actually met the Baptist, someone who experienced him first hand toward the beginning of his ministry. I have here before me some letters written by a contemporary of John's, a man who came across the Baptist toward the beginning of his ministry who recorded his impressions in correspondence to a friend.

Here's an excerpt from the first letter, dated, according to the Hebrew calendar, **December 3rd, 3761**. The author writes, and I quote:

"You know, by any standard, that John the Baptist is a mess! A loud-mouthed, overbearing, know-it-all who hangs out in the sticks, eats bugs and yells a lot. I swear the

man's raised the act of dressing down to an art form, looking forever like something the dog dragged in from the compost pile. His hair hasn't seen a comb in decades and there are twigs in his beard, which is down to his knees. What's worse, he smells! My God, the man smells like a bloody camel in heat and it's no wonder,,,wrapping himself like that in some rank and lice-ridden camel skin. Holds it on with a leather belt, for heaven's sake, so it'll pass for clothes.

Not even the bedouins *wear* their camel skins for God's sake! No question about it, that brow-beating, beetle-eating Baptist fellow is one God-forsaken mess!

So you may wonder why the guy's so popular. But, I'm telling you, only because you haven't met him. Those of us who've seen him face-to-face understand why people flocked from all over creation to hear him. And flock they do, from as far south as Jericho and as far north as Galilee; I'm telling you, folks *throng* to hear this madman, despite the fact he pretty much always says the same thing:

(Wayne stands and bellows from his place in the choir)

"Repent! For the kingdom of heaven has come near!"

That's what he's always hollering. Or some variation on that theme. Funny thing is, people can't seem to get enough of it.

Maybe it's because there is so much craziness in the world - famine, thieving, taxes, people not getting along, warring nations, you know the drill. Maybe folks are just ready to hear something different. Something bigger than what happening to them. What's happening all around them. You know, that they don't feel like they're just floundering around in some indifferent and amoral universe. I don't know. But it's like, when the Baptist carries on, people feel some kind of relief or something.

The Baptist swears - and I'm talking like a sailor - the guy's painfully uncouth; don't let him in your pulpit – but the guy swears a better day is coming. Swears God's rule is just around the corner so everybody'd better get with the program and get right with God or whatever. He never gives any details. Except for that wild look in his eye, you'd think he was making the whole thing up. But that look – it's like the Baptist is focused on everything and nothing at the same time, like he can see something the rest of us can't. Something big and important, and a little scary, at least to me. I'm telling you, the guy's weird. Nobody like to be around him for long but somehow it's hard to keep away.

Anyway, whatever it is that John sees, he swears that we've all gotta 'fess up before it gets here, and...I don't know...change or something. Inside. He's always talking about like cleaning house in your heart, sweeping out what's dusty and useless, clearing the shelves, cleaning the closets, whatever, as if to make room for something new.

And when you do, he says, and you *really* have to do it, see, because it's like John can look right into your heart and see every single thing that's there including what you were thinking about last night never mind doing, which is really kind of spooky and anyway, none of his business, the way I look at it.

But if you *really* let go of what's holding you back, if you *really* give up what's pushing you down, *really* release all those useless ways of being that drag you someplace you don't want to be, why then...if John reads your heart and it's *really* true, then...he'll dunk you in the water.

Big deal, right? Who needs it, right?

Ha. I dare you to try it.

It's a purification thing, see, like what the priests do for themselves, only John does it

for us. That's another reason we like him. Or put up with him, anyway. John acts like we're important. Like what we do with our hearts matters to God. And like whoever or whatever is coming, is coming for us. Hm. Funny, huh.

December 7th, 3761

Okay, so I did it. I got dunked. Can you believe that? I mean, I really thought about it at first. But then something caught fire in me and I quit thinking altogether. And when whatever caught fire in me burned up, there was like there was this empty place inside me that I knew somehow Baptist could fill. So I let him dunk me.

And I'm here to tell you, being purified by the Baptist is like nothing you've ever experienced. At first, you know, you're standing there in the water with him and you sort of wish maybe he had purified himself a little so he wouldn't smell so bad. And then you notice all these people standing around, some of them praying, some of them crying, most of them just staring like they have no idea what's going on. And you begin to feel a little stupid, like why am I standing here shriveling like a prune in this river waiting for this hair-ball to decide whether or not I'm genuine dunk material.

And then, before you know it, John grabs you by the hair and starts mumbling something real low. Then he whips you back until you're eyeballin' heaven and starts shoutin' and the next thing you know you're down in the water. And he holds you down, too – you can't fight him; I tried. But the more you fight the longer he holds you down, just to make sure you get the message. Until suddenly, he *yanks* you back up and pulls your waterlogged dripping head right into his hairy face.

And I'll tell you what, what you see in his eyes right then, well, you just know he's telling the truth. It's hard to explain but you know something important just happened,

you're glad you pushed some of whatever out of your heart to make room for whatever the heck it is.

December 10th, 3761

Today? You wouldn't believe it. The big guns showed up! You know, the heavy hitters from the synagogue, the dudes, the Men in Black; I'm talking Farley Pharisee and his weasel Sadducees. Just appeared out of nowhere and started muscling in like they owned the place. And we're all looking at each other like, "what are **they** doing here?" But there they are, bigger than life, lifting their robes oh so dainty-like so as not to get them mussed, and heading down the hill to see The Man.

Josh starts taking bets on whether they'll actually go in the water. I say, "no way" but a couple guys actually put some drachma down on Farley.

(Wayne starts moving from choir to center of chancel and looks around, angrily.)

Then somebody says, "hey, check out John." And we all turn around to see how John's taking all this in and whoa, is he hot! I mean, John's a pretty passionate guy even when he's calm, but you should see him when he's all exercised! Looks like an over-ripe tomato, or maybe more like a volcano ready to explode. And then he *does* explode!

"You brood of vipers!"

He sort of hisses it between his teeth like he's spitting out poison.

"Who told YOU to flee from the wrath to come?"

(Wayne comes down chancel steps)

Like maybe the Pharisees are supposed to stick around and take it. Like maybe the wrath was *meant* for them.

Now you gotta understand, the Pharisees call the shots around here and they're not

used to taking a whole lot of flak about it. So ole' Farley, he starts to open his mouth to protest but John cuts him right off:

"Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Don't you DARE presume to tell me you're sons of Abraham. My God can raise children of Abraham from these MUDDY STONES. BEAR FRUIT, I TELL YOU!"

He was really starting to go a little crazy. The guys and I, we're all holding our breath. Then he gets right up into Farley's face and the guys and I think for sure he's going to punch him out. But instead he sort of spits out these words.

"Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees, and every tree that doesn't bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And ole' Farley, he doesn't move. I'm talking, the guy is frozen! We *all* are. Then the Baptist's eyes sort of glaze over and he gets real quiet. We wait. Finally he starts talking real low and calm, like he's coming from some other place, and he says:

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to carry his sandals."

Now you gotta know John never talks like that. Besides, who could be more powerful than John? Except maybe the Pharisees, and they're flat on their knees by now.

"I baptize you with water, but the One who is coming will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

(pause) That's it. That's all he says. Nobody moves for a minute, until he just turns and walks out of the water and up the hill and nobody sees him again for a good long while.

(Wayne stomps back up steps and back to choir seat.)

Still nobody budes. Or says a thing. Even the Pharisees and Sadducees keep their traps shut. Truth is, nobody really knows exactly *what* to do or say.

The One who is coming? Who's coming? Somebody more powerful than John? Who could be more powerful than John? And what in God's name is baptism by *fire* going to be like? And all that talk about a winnowing fork and unquenchable fire and whatnot. The guys and I, we figure whatever's chaff in our lives's going to be hurtin' big time. So we're thinkin', what the heck, let's all pray to be wheat, you know, so we'll get gathered up and miss the burning part. But truth is, we know better. Every one of us is more like seven-grain bread - a little wheat, a little rye, a little chaff and a whole lot of roughage. It's got us worried.

December 25, in the year 1

Today they changed how we number years. Can you believe that? Next thing you know they'll be rearranging the hours of the day for farmers and school kids. Is nothing sacred?

Anyhow, I've been thinking, and I told the guys, too. You know how John was all the time comparing one thing to another? Like when he called the Pharisees vipers, or when he told us to make like trees and bear fruit? Well, I've been thinking that maybe when he was talking about that unquenchable fire...I may be out on a limb here...but you know how fire doesn't always destroy things, but sometimes just changes them, makes them different? Like turning ore to iron, or cold hands to warm hands, or a lump of dough into a loaf of bread? That sort of thing.

So maybe the fire of this powerful somebody who's on his way isn't meant so much

to *destroy* us as to change us, burn up what's not so great in us. And, I don't know, maybe warm up what's worth saving? So it can grow into something nourishing and healthy? Does that sound stupid?

The guys and I, we took a vote and decided that's probably what John means by this baptism by fire that's coming up. So we're not so nervous now. But still, you know, even a small fire can burn. So we figure if the One who's on his way is anything like the Baptist, well, there's liable to be a major conflagration.

So we're all trying to turn it around a bit. You know, let go of what doesn't work so well, and maybe pitch in around the house, and down the street and all. You know, making like trees and bearing fruit and whatnot, like the Baptist said. Josh even took that widow over in Bethany some oil or something. Should have seen the look on her face!

Anyway, we don't talk about it much outside the crowd. Who'd believe us anyway? But you gotta know what we're all thinking. Who **is** this One we're preparing for, anyway?

To the glory of God. Amen.