

John the Baptist A Sterling Character

A sermon by the Rev. Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday of Advent, December 7, 2008.

John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
Mark 1:4

Advent is the season in which we are players on the stage of the great drama of redemption. The first character to make his entrance on the stage of the drama is the prophet Isaiah calling for us to clear the way for the coming of a savior. *Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill will be made low and..the rough places a plain.* The psalmist proclaims that *mercy and truth have kissed each other.* In the letter of St. Peter, we are exhorted to *lead lives of holiness and godliness and peace without spot or blemish.* Finally, St. Mark describes how God chose the remarkable character of John the Baptist who enters proclaiming the coming of Christ.

If this were a stage play, John would have been a character out of central casting. God knew that John's rough hewn style might turn people off. God was aware that an outspoken person who tells us what we don't really want to hear makes us uncomfortable. Those who tell the truth about us are at times both annoying and inspiring because they make us uncomfortable with the truth about ourselves. We don't like people in our face with their opinions, especially if their opinions are in conflict with our own. But God knew that John the Baptist was the right person at the right time and in the right place for being a herald of salvation. This is the kind of person God wanted and this is what we have in John the Baptist.

I have a few pieces of old silver in my home. At first glance they all look alike. But I know there is a difference. Some pieces are sterling, solid silver, while others are silver plated. You can usually tell the difference in the weight and most items are marked if they are plated or sterling. In the great drama of redemption the character of John the Baptist stands out as someone who is genuine and authentic. He is the real thing.

To be sure, John the Baptist is his own person. He dresses differently. He eats what seem to us strange foods. He is bold in proclaiming the coming of Christ and doesn't hesitate to tell people what they need to know. He is off putting to some while others listened to him because what he had to say made sense. John and Jesus were cousins and knew each other. Biblical scholars tell us that before he began his ministry, Jesus spent time in preparation for his ministry with John in the community of Qumran near the Dead Sea. John is one whom you would call the salt of the earth. Because he lives the ascetic life in the bleak Judean desert, he is apart from worldly concerns that allows him to be close to God for whom he is qualified to speak

I like John for his strength of character and his boldness in proclaiming the truth in a direct, honest and forthright manner. I admire him for his ability to be so convincing in a disarming way. His authenticity comes from believing what he says and saying what he believes. We can trust someone like that. He may be irritating in his manner and style, but that is not his problem. It is our problem because we are confronted with the truth. If boldness bluntness is what it takes to get us to change, then so be it. John never wanted anyone to think that he was the Christ and he made that clear. He did not feel he was worthy of untying the thong of Jesus' sandals. He always points beyond himself to the Christ who is to come. He is totally authentic, a man without pretense. What they see is who he is.

John the Baptist is intrusive because he invades our complacent world and challenges us. For those of us who were brought up to be competitive and to achieve, John turns everything around by telling us that those things don't matter. What really matters is to be concerned about things of the Spirit. We can become too comfortable with our familiar patterns of living without asking why. We can become accustomed to old habits and painful situations that are unhealthy for us. John calls us to repentance, a turning around from the old ways to the new way of the Spirit of God. Breaking out of old habits means changing the way we see and do things to bring out the better person that is in each of us. That is what John's message is all about.

Abraham Lincoln once sat through a long well crafted sermon. When he was later asked what he thought of it, he replied that it was very eloquent, but what it lacked was that it didn't ask enough of us. So I am asking you to take a look at your own life and question if you are expecting enough of yourself. Name your shortcomings that may or may not be obvious to anyone else but you. It may be your temper that gets out of control. It may be your unwillingness to express feelings appropriately. It may be lack of self-esteem. Whatever it may be, take the time to reassess who you are and where you are headed. Now is the time to make those changes, not tomorrow, not next week, but right now.

As you buy and wrap gifts for this coming Christmas season, make a mental note of how you present yourself as a gift to others and to God. The best gift we can give each other is to be upbeat and hopeful and not give in to despair. It is when everything seems hopeless that we realize our need for it. Hope is where the "unreasonableness" of our Christian faith begins.