

John the Baptist's axe

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This Sunday we get . . . John the Baptist. Again? Really? Isn't it time for an angel to make an appearance?

I'm tired of having John the Baptist call me a viper. I know, I know, I have all these faults. Don't threaten me with that axe. I try so hard to bear good fruit, but I'm afraid it isn't enough.

I'm surrounded by people who are clearly in a more crabby mood than I am, and I'm trying to be sympathetic, but it's hard. This attempt of mine to transform myself into a compassionate person is taking longer than I thought it would. I see people at work having meltdowns, and my response is to hide under my desk (metaphorically, although there are days that the thought of literally curling up under my desk is almost irresistible). I don't go to them to say, "What can I do to help you through this painful time?"

Perhaps I'm ready for that axe after all.

Or maybe, I need to pay attention to John the Baptist with a bit more focus. Advent reminds me that I'm not my final, improved version of myself. Advent reminds me that I still have work to do. And I need to hear that message. I'm lazy and inclined to coast, and it's good to know that God has a vision for me that is vaster than any I could dream myself.

John's message is not one ultimately of despair. He doesn't say, "There's nothing you can do. The messiah is coming, and all is lost."

No, John tells us to repent. It's not too late. The word repent is often associated with seeking forgiveness of sins, but that's a very narrow definition. The larger meaning of that word is "to turn." Turn away from what isn't working in our lives. Turn towards God and all the ways our lives could be better.

How are you bearing fruit? One reason God came to be with us, one reason God took on human form was to show us how to live. If living like Jesus is your goal, what kinds of practices can get you there?

Even this message can make me feel a bit of despair. There are so many possible practices, so little time. Or do I really have as little time as I think I do?

We live in a culture that likes to keep us busy. We are all too busy to heed John's message: "Repent." Turn around. Do it now, before it is too late.

What would our culture look like if we took Jesus as our model of behavior? If we trusted God more? If, instead of listening to the blare of TV and the Internet and the many forms of media, what would happen if we listened for God? What would happen if we structured our lives according to the plan that Jesus reveals? What would happen if we decided that Jesus meant what he said, and we structured our lives accordingly?

As you think about the implications of the answers to those questions, you see why our culture rushes in to fill the voids that most of us don't even perceive in our individual lives and larger communities. For if we lived our lives and made our decisions based on the kingdom that Jesus reveals, it would be a very different world indeed. John gives us a hint later in the Gospel for Sunday: if you have two coats, share with the person who has none, and likewise with food; don't cheat people, rather be content with your wages.

Repent. Turn away from the life of bloat and greed that our culture of consumption offers us. Turn towards a vision of kingdom living. Don't wait until you're dead. Do what you can to create the kingdom here and now.

The Christmas angels will be here soon with their message of hope. But John the Baptist, too, has a message of hope, if we have ears to hear.

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