

THE AWKWARD TRUTH
Luke 3:1-6

Every December without fail he shows up. As predictable as shoppers at the mall, mistletoe, and sleigh bells. This time of the year you can count on him to visit us yet again. And, no, I am not talking about Santa Claus. I am talking about John the Baptist. He doesn't show up on greeting cards or on t.v. and there are really no songs about him you would ever hum. But in the church he is our Advent companion year after year. He usually gets top billing the first two Sundays in Advent. But it needs to be said that the only thing he has in common with Santa is his beard. After that, it's a very long way from the North Pole to the Judean outback.

He's a voice crying in the wilderness. He wants to prepare the way of the Lord. He's a forerunner, an advance scout, the buzz that precedes the main show. He aims to cause a stir, anticipation of something amazing on the horizon. He sees ahead the salvation of God. But he's awfully severe and he's not looking for friends. He's looking for converts, people willing to change their lives to prepare for the coming One.

He's absolutely emphatic about what must be done. He's in your face. Repent, change your life, come down into the Jordan and be baptized. Then get your life ready for this climatic turning point in Israel's history. He is no "reed shaken by the wind". He is stern, point blank, and utterly convinced that he is right.

The multitudes flocked out to see this wild man with honey and locust clinging to his unshaven beard. They want to see this ranting prophet with the strange wardrobe of camel skin and leather belt. Does John welcome them gingerly to his outdoor baptismal font? No, he confronts this "brood of snakes" as he calls them with this question, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" He's certain the Coming One will use a winnowing fork to separate the wheat from the chaff and then the chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire.

John calls to the crowd sardonically, "Don't think that you will escape the wrath to come just because you claim to be children of Abraham. God is able to raise up from these stones new children. In truth, God is about to take the ax to the root of the trees and hurl unfruitful trees into the fire." It's obvious John skipped charm school. He is confrontational and demanding. A poor candidate to become an installed pastor in a church. Wouldn't last a

month, probably. Too hard, too loud, too much, way over the top. John is an apocalyptic prophet and he doesn't much care if you like him or not. He has a word, a stern word, to deliver to Israel and they need to pay attention.

And so he demanded that the people shape up and share what they had. Those with two coats should share with those who have none. Those with ample food should give to those who have little. And tax collectors are told to collect no more than they are entitled to. And soldiers are told to rob no one with violence or false accusation and be content with what they are paid. In other words, John demands that Israel start acting like Israel was always expected to act-but seldom bothered to.

And John was tough not just on the "little people" but on the movers and shakers as well. He had little to do with the Pharisees and Sadducees who came out to hear him. And he had even less regard for Herod Antipas, that puppet ruler for the Romans. After Herod married his brother's wife Herodias, John denounced the marriage as contrary to the Law of Moses. Even the Jewish historian Josephus noted that when John condemned his marriage, Herod viewed this wild prophet as a political threat. And so Herod had him arrested and imprisoned. We know the sad ending of John's life. His head was served up on a platter. Then his disciples took his body and gave it a proper burial.

And so ends the life of an absolutely unique person in the history of Israel. Jesus called him "more than a prophet". For Jesus, there was "none greater than John". He was the "Elijah to come", the one who saw the coming of the Messiah, the Savior of Israel. His role was utterly unique, bridging the age of Moses and the age of the Messiah. Straddling two ages, he helped usher in the Kingdom of God, the reign of God. No one else was like John, a prophet without peer.

This morning as we come to the table of our Lord, we remember all those who've held us accountable, who will not let us off the hook. We give thanks for all those, like John the Baptist, who refused to dispense "cheap grace". Those who demanded "fruit that befits repentance", behavioral changes that go beyond mere promises. Think of those unrelenting trainers on the reality show "The Biggest Losers" who will not let people rest in the obesity that is truly killing them. They push and they push and they will not let up. These are the drill sergeants that we cannot stand, but who in fact save our lives.

Anyone who has ever had a demanding teacher or coach or parent knows of what I speak. You have felt the sting of their criticism, the hard word that seeks to overcome the sloth and indolence within each of us. And you know how hard it is, how difficult to take their ceaseless prodding. And

yet those are the people we never forget. Because they never let up and they never let go of us. They poke and push and demand the very best that is within you.

Sometimes the spirit of John the Baptist shows up when we have to speak the awkward truth to one another. An inconvenient truth that demands accountability and responsibility, that will not tolerate sloppiness or arrogance or defiance. It so happens that Debbie Steffen and I are serving together on the Presbytery's Committee on the Ministry. We function as gatekeepers for congregations and pastors. We have to enforce the Book of Order when it is not so easy. We must often speak the hard truth to pastors and congregations who have to be called to account for their actions. It's often very awkward, these moments of truth telling.

And yet I remind myself often that the Good News of Jesus Christ embodies both judgment and grace. There would be no need for grace if there were no judgment. We all stand before God aware that we fall short, sometimes way short. This past week yet another celebrity was forced to acknowledge his "transgressions". We all know what it is like to fail and sometimes fail publicly. And thus we all come before God in need of grace. Judgment upon the wrong in our lives. Grace, amazing grace, ample grace for all our sins and transgressions.

The table of our Lord is where we admit once again who we really are. We are, in truth, sinners in need of God's redeeming grace. We need not deny this awkward truth about ourselves. That is who we are. Here at this table we see spread before us the broken body of our Lord, the life of Christ poured out for us. This is a sacrament of forgiveness and grace and reconciliation offered to you at the foot of the cross.

But let us not be glib about what this table means. This table calls for repentance. The table of our Lord Jesus Christ urgently invites us to take stock of our lives. Here we are summoned to be reconciled with God and others. Sharing in the life of Christ here encourages us to move beyond our personal status quo. This table calls us to give an account for our discipleship. Here we would be transformed into the likeness of Christ who loved us and gave himself for us.

Imagine that the prophet John greets you on your way to the table this morning. He is calling you to do something about your life. To become answerable once again to the Lord and Giver of Life. To change the things in your life that need to be changed. The prophet hip deep in the mud offers you a challenge this second Sunday in Advent. Prepare yourself so that the Lord and Giver of Life can take his rightful place in your heart and in your life. Prepare the way for the Lord. May it be so.