

2nd Sunday in Advent

The Kingdom of God

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Today we are introduced to the radical figure of John the Baptist—a wandering prophet from the wilderness, clothed in camel’s hair, living of the land, preaching the end of the world. “Reform your lives!” he warns. Its now or never. For “The reign of God is at hand.”

He will inspire one young man in particular to change his life, to take the plunge into the waters of repentance, to retrace John’s steps back into the desert wilderness, and once having wrestled with his own demons, to return to his native Galilee as a wandering prophet himself.

He also draws the attention of the religious leaders of the people, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They too go out to the banks of the river Jordan to see what all the hubbub is about. Its not that they feel any need to repent. After all they are the religious leaders of their people. But whereas John had welcomed the young Galilean, he savages these religious officials, “You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come.”

What’s up? John is preaching a message of moral reform. And yet when the moral leaders of the people come to him he is sharp and judgmental against them. Against them! You can imagine how they took it. Probably no better than they would later take the new Galilean.

But why does John do this? Why does he treat them of all people, the good and the upright, so harshly?

I think part of the reason lies in the difference between morality and religion. Now you may tend to think of that being moral and being religious are two sides of the same coin. But while they ought to complement one other, they are different and the difference is crucial.

Morality is about building up our character that we might have the power to act with prudence and courage, with self-control and in justice, that we might have the power and the insight to do the right thing, the right way, in the right place at the right time. Morality is about making good choices, it is about becoming independent..

Religion on the other hand is about recognizing our dependence. Religion is about how we relate to what lies beyond our power, ultimately beyond even our understanding. Religious piety is the felt recognition that there are limits to our power, limits to our freedom, that in the end we are not simply the product of our own labor, that we cannot be ourselves by ourselves, but that ultimately we depend on one another for who we are, for that we are at all.

The religious response to the recognition of the magnitude of what we owe can only be one thing--gratitude. Like the debtors in Jesus parables, we owe too much to ever balance the books. We can never pay off our debt, we can only accept what we have been given for what it is—a gift.

But that is surprisingly hard to do. It can be hard to do, because to do it, we first have to acknowledge our dependence, we first have to acknowledge that our power to act is limited, that we are in need of help, that we cannot bring everything under our own control.

While religion can motivate us to be moral, morality does not necessarily motivate us to be religious. The two ought to reinforce each other, but if we only seek to be morally upright, if we cannot forgive moral transgressions, either by others or ourselves—if we cannot admit to ever being confused, overwhelmed, already entangled in sin, than we will end up raging against our dependence, our fragility, and our vulnerabilities and everything that we cannot control will become our enemy.

Such rage is really what John means by the wrath of God. God is love, but love is a gift, love is outside our control, love is beyond our ability to comprehend. To rage against whatever lies outside our control is also tragically to rage against just such a love. While on the other hand to love back, in return, is to surrender our self-control, for to love is to come to need another whom we cannot control.

Love makes us vulnerable. As Jacob Boehme, a Lutheran mystic long ago says, God's love will feel like God's wrath to whoever cannot bear to admit that they need help. God's love will feel like God's wrath to whoever uses their moral virtue to assure themselves that they are in charge, that they will always have the will power to do the right thing, that they do not need any help, or forgiveness. God's love will feel like God's wrath to whoever rages against the dark, against any hint that they are not the center even of their own lives.

The ritual of baptism in which we immerse ourselves in the water of repentance is in part a way to enact our self-surrender to the larger whole. Through immersion in the waters of baptism we release ourselves into the broader current of life and of love.

The classical philosopher Plotinus offers a metaphor for the individual soul in union with God. He compares such a soul to a drop of water in the ocean. Some have taken this as an image of self-annihilation, but I think this is mistaken. For is a drop of water any less a drop of water by lying within the infinite expanse of the ocean? What changes is not the drop of water itself, but everything that separates that drop from all others. What changes is not the drop but any possibility of considering that drop as self-sufficient or at the center, indeed as anything other than a part of the vast ocean in which it subsists. Or it reminds me of the story of two fish asking each other where is this ocean people talk about.

Where is this Kingdom of God Jesus and John were going on about? When is it finally going to come? Its here, all around us. Its all that I give you and you give me and God gives us all. Where is this Kingdom of God Jesus keeps talking about? We' re swimming in it.