

3rd Sunday of Advent

Sermon 12.13.15

Scripture: Isaiah 12:2-6

Luke 3:7-18

I told you last week: John is often felt to be a threatening figure. I *told* you; I *warned* you of the wrath that was to come. John, Jesus' cousin; John, who was born about three months prior to Jesus and would serve as a herald of Jesus, and who was sent (as he understood himself to have been) to prepare a way for the Lord's coming; John who would live life much the same as Jesus did, both beginning in the wilderness and then returning to civilization where each would gather disciples and preach and teach, both eventually arrested (though Jesus many months after John) and then put to death by people in power who weren't worthy of it at all: John, who went before Jesus in so many ways, is often felt to be a threatening figure.

That was clear enough last week. Likened to fuller's soap, as if come to cleanse us roughly that we might actually be of some good purpose in the coming of the Lord; likened to a refiner's fire that we who are but raw materials, mixed metals, might be refined and strengthened so to be an instrument to some good end: John comes to us with that as his pretext and his promise. In short, he's not going to deal gently with us.

But now we see that's not even the half of it. The surprising thing is that he might also have been a tempering figure. John the Moderate: I bet you didn't see that coming.

"You brood of vipers!" he said to the crowds, those who came out to be baptized by him. Did you get that? That's what he called those who had been attracted to him, those who came out to receive of him. (Imagine what he would have said of those who refused him altogether!) "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

What, I have to wonder, spurred John to this sort of greeting?

Of course, I've often wondered at how people were attracted to this, why people responded so eagerly to John who had this to say to them. I've often wondered at the apparent fact that with these and "many other exhortations," as the narrative voice notes, John "proclaimed the good news to the people." I've often wondered, this is good news?

And we'll get to that.

But first, I have to wonder what spurred John to be so fiery in the first place.

His father, Zechariah, was a Temple priest, and high-up one at that. He was, after all, remembered to have been in the sanctuary on a High Holy Day while the whole assembly was

gathered outside. This means that he had closer access to the Holy of Holies than most other people, and this means that he was a priest of some stature.

Funny, then, that John would take his call to serve the Lord into the wilderness. His father was near the center of civilization, the Temple, which was designed even with pillars out front that rise to great height but hold up nothing for they were meant to suggest that they hold up the heavens, hold up the roof of the world. Such was the Temple and the practices that went on therein: they were to be understood as giving form and shape to all that is such that without them life itself would collapse, revert back to that formless void that was in the beginning. The created order of God, without the Temple at its center, and the Holy of Holies at the center of that, would cease to be.

Zechariah was near the center of the center, and his son would head out to the edge of the outer edge.

Preacher's kids: am I right?

But, of course, it can't simply be that. This isn't about the so-called generation gap as arose in the late 1960s. And this isn't about some adolescent rebellion: adolescence wasn't even a concept that had a name until the turn of the last century. And the notion of departing from family and tradition to become "self-made": for that you needed as pretext the printing press, the Protestant Revolution, the age of exploration, and an ocean between the so-called old world and the new, not to mention a whole continent wherein you could manifest your destiny. John, of course, had none of these. So what was it? What drove him away from everything that held up the created order and made possible human civilization?

What was suddenly so wrong with civilization?

Today is the last day of Hanukkah. This evening people will light the last of the eight candles of their menorahs. I learned the ins and outs of what gave rise to Hanukkah in divinity school, in a great and well-loved class, The Jewish Liturgical Year, from a brilliant and gifted professor, Jon Levenson, but by way of reading the most boring book in the world whose cover even was boring, and orange, as I remember it—a two volume set. Needless to say, I read it with the resistance, a resistance perhaps equal to the Maccabees' resistance of Antiochus IV.

These were four brothers, and they came to be called the Maccabees, which means "hammer." They led a revolt in the year 167 before the Common Era, against the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV. (We've been hearing a lot about this empire lately, the Seleucid Empire, the Greek empire that reigned before the Roman Empire took over. Remember Daniel's vision of the four

beasts come out of the sea? The last and scariest one was the one that represented the empire under he's heavy reigned he lived and suffered: the Seleucid Empire.)

But as to the Maccabees, it was their revolt that gave rise to the event that established Hanukkah as a holiday. I can't tell you much more than that based on my reading of that boring orange book, but I can tell you what David Brooks wrote in a column I clipped out of the *New York Times* several years ago and came across in my recent cleaning out of my desk.

He wrote that Antiochus had "issued a series of decrees defiling the temple, confiscating wealth and banning Jewish practice, under penalty of death. It's unclear why he did this. Some historians believe that extremist Jewish reformers were in control and were hoping to wipe out what they saw as the primitive remnants of their faith. Others believe Antiochus thought the Jews were disloyal fifth columnists in his struggle against the Egyptians and, hence, was hoping to assimilate them into his nation. Regardless, those who refused to eat pork were killed in an early case of pure religious martyrdom."

This, of course, galvanized a certain sect of Jews to stage a revolt, a sect that gained notoriety mostly for their guerilla tactics. It also marked a turning point in the way Judaism was lived out. Under the leadership of these men whom Mr. Brooks described as "moderate fanatics," what had long been a nation of people adaptable to different contexts and inclusive of different varieties of Jews now crystallized into a more fixed frame—clearly marking those who were inside from those who were out and complete with forced circumcisions, purity tests, and unforgiving membership codes. In other words, one faction of an oppressed minority amidst an increasingly oppressive social context grew more and more militant, turning even on its own members.

Mr. Brooks pointedly claims of the Maccabees, "They were not the last bunch of angry, bearded religious guys to win an insurgency campaign against a great power in the Middle East, but they may have been among the first."

Recently, I heard on a political podcast I listen to one of the regular participants point out that there is one thing the United States has going for it in the terrible conundrum that the whole world now faces—that is, how to deal with ISIS and radical nihilism of so called Islamic fundamentalism. We have one thing going for us, she claimed, and this is it: the good will of the Muslims who live in the United States. Unlike in certain parts of Europe, where Muslims are largely dispossessed and disregarded, in the United States Muslims live more middle-class, mainstream lives. And that's an asset we should not squander.

Is it true? Do Muslims thrive in America? Is that at least possible? I think so.

A case study of one: the head of the PTA at my kids' school is Muslim (I think), a man from Pakistan, a doctor married to Pakistani writer with two children. It never occurred to me that this was anything of note, and I've never heard any other parents of the school children talk about it as if it were noteworthy, to say nothing of problematic. I never thought of this well-meaning volunteer as anything but that until I thought about her remark on that podcast—that the fact of Muslims living well in America might be an asset unique to America, far harder to find in Europe.

Another case study of one: Jack made a couple of friends at a hotel pool while we were away over Thanksgiving, one of whom was a young boy recently moved from France. I sat by the side of the pool, laying out the take-out dinner we'd bought, and this boy kept coming up. (He was enjoying our French fries, though not out of national loyalty, I imagine.) So I talked with him; I asked him if he likes living in the U.S. or in France better. The U.S., was his answer, though in an accent so thick I struggled to understand him, because in France there are too many people from Africa now. Too many blacks.

Whoa.

But the other boy playing was mixed-race, a family that included a white mother and a black father. I don't think Jack understood this new friend's answer, who was (it seemed) a very sweet boy. Really, they all were: the one foreign-born, the one mixed-race, and mine, a generations-long white American with a little Jew mixed in.

Just go play. All of y'all: just go play and I'll arrange for food when you're hungry.

If we of establishment America squander the good will of Muslims living as Americans in America (or to those who would become so), we do so at our own peril. Forget that it's just wrong. Forget for a moment that to speak of Muslims, or any group of people, as if they are not people, as if categorically they're criminals or animals or some social scourge: forget that to engage in such terms is to engage with evil, a betrayal of the gospel and of our Lord. Forget all that and think pragmatically for a second, expediently: if we let the likes of Donald Trump define the terms of engagement around the pressing issue of fundamentalist terrorism and nihilism, then we do so at our own peril.

Let's not become the Seleucid Empire to the religious minorities in our midst.

Let's not make enemies of our neighbors.

Let's not give cause to moderates that they radicalize.

The Maccabean revolt is remembered with a thick smear of romanticism slathered on top of it. Four brave brothers defending the faith, light amidst darkness that persisted against odds. But like

any battle, people bled and died and what resulted of it was not merely a menorah that stayed lit far longer than what oil was there should have allowed for. It was also a religion and culture that were far more rigid and mean than had previously been, and than they ever needed to be.

Of course, the Judaism that resulted under the repression and persecution of the Seleucid Empire is a far cry from ISIS. They were, according to Mr. Brooks, *moderate* fanatics, and not nihilistic fanatics. But perhaps fanaticism needn't have been called forth in the first place.

In any event, it was amidst such moderate fanaticism that John emerged from the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Come to think of it, it might have *because* of such moderate fanaticism that he left the Temple priesthood in the first place.

This might have been his to inhabit, you know. Son of a priest, John might have had such a respectable livelihood available to him as a birthright. But he left it behind, left it in preference for the wilderness; and it might have been the fanaticism that had him do so.

Maybe he wanted a life of blessing and grace, a priesthood that actually helped people find and feel their God rather than one that emphasized the alienation. So maybe the “brood of vipers” that he addressed: these might have been people living amidst a Judaism that hardly resembled what living as subjects to the Living Lord could well be.

Consider John's rage and then his rather mild solution to all that cause him to rage: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor;’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” Consider that rage.

And now consider his proposed solution, offered when this “brood of vipers” asked simply, “What should we do?” Just this: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” As for tax collectors: “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” And as for soldiers: “Don't extort money. But instead be satisfied with your wages.”

In other words, when it comes to what these outrageous people must do in order to address the problem of their outrageousness, they should do this: share, play fair, and don't extort or threaten. (Go play, all of y'all: God is seeing to the snacks.)

The mildness of the prescription makes me wonder to what extreme the people had gone to be both “religious” but also offensive, condemnable. Really perhaps it strikes some fanatics as good news that they no longer need resort to such fanaticism. Instead, relax, be kind, enjoy.

Not that such things necessarily characterize John. Hardly a relaxed, rejoicing person, John was himself full of certain expectations as regards the Messiah. He would be one who was more powerful than John, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, and who, winnowing fork in hand, would clear his threshing-floor by gathering up wheat into his granary and throwing chaff into a sort of hellfire.

Or would he?

Well, try to remember: did he?

If you can't remember, rest assured we have the whole church year ahead to search such things out. Meanwhile, consider this: four chapters after John made this proclamation about what Jesus would do, John sent word via his disciples (for he was in prison) as to whether Jesus was the one for whom they'd been waiting or if they were to wait for another? It's as if Jesus wasn't living up to what John had expected Jesus to do. It's as if John was disappointed by Jesus being even more moderate than John was.

Be moderate, John might have said to Jesus: moderate these extremist urges. But don't be *too* moderate.

Funny how we expect the savior of the world to do things just as we would do them.

But perhaps separating the good from the bad and burning the bad in unquenchable fire isn't as radical as it might at first seem.

Actually, no: no “perhaps” about it. Really, such parsing out good from bad is just more of the same.

If we feel John to be a threatening figure, then that shouldn't have us feeling the same about Jesus, and certainly not *more so* about Jesus. John was Jesus' herald, but he was not Jesus' role model—which John himself knew (“I'm not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals”) even if he couldn't fully admit it.

It's useful to recognize all the ways John and Jesus are similar. It's *enlightening* to recognize all the ways that they differ, actually all the ways that John and the likes of us are similar while Jesus is entirely different, radically, blessedly other. Jesus isn't going to save the world by the same means for which the world needs saving. He's not going to save us from our wrath and our condemnation by

means of wrath and condemnation. He's got another way, a better way: grace, forgiveness, self-giving, and redeeming love.

John was right, and John was wrong. Have you ever been allowed to say such a thing? Have you ever been encouraged to think such a thing?

You know, the people who feature in the stories of the Bible aren't flat role models of how we should be. They're people who show us what it means to be a person—and one of the things it means to be a person is to be blessed of God and beloved of God even though we're often wrong, and always but partial. Wholeness yet awaits. Completion, perfection yet awaits. Christmas is coming. Salvation is near. Meantime, we might make the time less mean. Share, play fair, don't threaten: we should be able to manage that. It's harder than it looks, I realize. But it's certainly worth a try.

Thanks be to God.