

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on December 16, 2018 (Advent III, Year C)*

Some people have asked me why I don't start my sermons with a prayer. Something like, "In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Or "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O God, my strength and my redeemer." Many preachers do this, and there's a fairly comfortable ritual of expectation that develops between preacher and congregation. There's also a practical element, as it often serves as a signal to the gathered assembly to sit down and settle in for the exposition of Scripture. In the parish I grew up in, it was the job of the acolytes to dim the lights at this point, which was intended to heighten the drama of the sermon, but generally had the effect of putting people to sleep. We certainly aren't instituting that practice here.

While there's nothing *wrong* with beginning a sermon with a prayer — some of my favorite preachers do this — I don't do it for two reasons. First, I believe the sermon should flow directly out of the proclamation of the gospel, as an uninterrupted response to the Good News of Jesus; an extension of it, rather than something separate. The other reason is that, quite frankly, if I haven't already said a prayer *before* I get into the pulpit, I'm hosed. And so are those of you subjected to the sound of my voice.

When John the Baptist started preaching on the banks of the Jordan River, he took this whole concept one step further. Not only did he neglect niceties or prayers or even inviting people to sit down, he kicked things off with an insult. "You brood of vipers!" he screams at the crowd. Now, that's an attention getter; a signal that no one will be settling into their seats for a comfortable and reassuring seasonal message. He's not there to make people feel good about themselves with a cotton candy-sweet, Joel Osteen-inspired self-help lesson. John the Baptist doesn't arrive on the Advent scene with his hair askew and his eyes aflame with zeal for the Lord, wearing camel skin and a leather belt and eating locusts and wild honey, to put people at ease. John shows up to shake us up. To rattle our collective Christmas cages and prepare us to greet the Christ-child with open arms and contrite hearts.

"Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" John demands to know. What's amazing is that his audience doesn't flee from *John* at this point. But in fairness, they have arrived hungry to hear his message of repentance; they didn't leave the comforts of their homes and venture out into the wilderness to hear a banal message of lukewarm piety. They are seeking transformation through the coming Messiah; the one whose sandal John was unworthy to untie. The one who would baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. They are seeking not comfort, but truth.

You, too, are here, I think, to hear a message of transformation and renewal that will change your life. That's what encounter with the risen Christ leads to, after all. It's why you're here during the season of Advent, to be challenged by the themes of repentance and preparation that come bursting through our Scripture readings and hymns and liturgical texts.

John's tough message of repentance, of encouraging us to turn away from that which tears us down and destroys the soul, is a reminder that living the Christian life is not always easy or comfortable. It's hard work to turn away from evil, to die daily to sin, to pick up your cross and follow Jesus. But then again, transformation — truly changing your ways and being made new — is never without cost. The most important things in life are rarely easy. Change is always hard. And John the Baptist doesn't sugar coat this fact as he preaches along the banks of the River Jordan.

Don't assume, he suggests, that just because you go to church *most* Sundays and send a check to the United Way every year that you're a finished spiritual product. That you shouldn't be down on your knees seeking forgiveness and looking to repent and return to the Lord. Just because you yourself have been baptized, doesn't mean the hard work of faith is complete. Baptism itself may be a once-and-for-all event, but it is also an ongoing process of ever-deepening relationship with God as we continually live into the baptismal promises we either made or were made on our behalf. There's a reason the word "disciple" forms the root of the word "discipline." Authentic faith is not an easy, no-cost proposition.

So, okay. John the Baptist is yelling about the coming judgment and the crowds haven't left. He's insulted their religious background as not being sufficient and they still haven't left. This is a tough passage to hear and *you* haven't left. But what we have in common with the crowds is the question that follows John's opening diatribe. We want to change; we want our encounter with Jesus to transform us indelibly and for the better. And so we ask, along with the crowds, "What then should we do?" It's a question dripping with an honest yearning; a query tinged with hope. "What then should we do?"

And John gives a surprisingly practical answer. This repentance of which John speaks, this repentance that is essential to faithfully preparing for the coming of the Messiah, is rooted in ethical obligations. In other words, it is rooted in love. If you have two coats, share one with someone who has none; if you have extra food, give some to the one who is hungry. In business, don't cheat people. When dealing with others, don't lie. None of this is rocket science. Share, be fair, don't be a jerk. We learned all of this in kindergarten, but somehow we've forgotten much of this in the intervening years. We've all gone astray at various points. And John calls us back to what matters in our interactions with others. He calls us to repent and return.

Jesus will make a similar point as he is asked about the most important aspect of faith. Again, it's not complicated. It all gets back to the simple command to love God and love neighbor. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love God, love neighbor. Share, be fair, don't be a jerk. The thing is, we can all do this. We can all take small steps to make the world a better place.

As we await the coming of the Christ-child, as the light increases on the Advent wreath, as your Christmas preparations build to a crescendo, heed the words of John the Baptist. Not the part about being a brood of vipers, necessarily. But bear fruits worthy of repentance. Show the world your faith by proclaiming it not only with your lips but in your lives. Reach out your hands in love to those who go without, in this community and beyond. Make room for kindness in your heart. And know that by doing so, you are preparing well for the one who is to come.