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**St. Thomas’ Episcopal Church, Owings Mills MD**

**December 4, 2022**

**Year A: The Second Sunday of Advent**

**Isaiah 11:1-10**

**Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19**

**Romans 15:4-13**

**Matthew 3:1-12**

**Jesus is the Light**

And, just like that, it’s already the Second Sunday of Advent.

And, as we do every year on this day, today we are reintroduced to one of the main characters of Advent: the powerful and challenging prophet, John the Baptist.

This year we hear Matthew’s telling of John’s message. Seemingly without warning or introduction, John the Baptist appears in the wilderness of Judea, calling on the people to “Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.”

John must have been quite a sight, dressed in camel’s hair and a leather belt, reminding people of one of Israel’s most important historical figures, Elijah – no doubt getting people to wonder if maybe that long-ago prophet had finally returned.

We’re told that John didn’t eat any “processed” foods, just locusts and wild honey. John only ate what God provided for the taking.

So, yeah, John must have been quite a sight but then there was his message: his bold and insistent call for people to change their ways, and an offer to dunk them in the River Jordan as a way to symbolize their new life.

I don’t know about you but in my experience, most people do not want to hear that they’re heading in the wrong direction – not when they’re driving and certainly not when they are living their lives. Yet, that was John’s message – change your heart and mind, change your ways, turn around before it’s too late!

And the most amazing thing to me is that crowds of people came to see John and to hear John his message – throngs of people came to the Jordan to let God and John drown their old life and to begin anew.

Like other prophets before him, John had little use for the religious establishment – the people who it seems thought that their heritage or their office would somehow be enough to save them.

Now, as a card-carrying member of the religious establishment myself, John’s attitude makes me feel… uncomfortable.

And yet, the Pharisees and Sadducees, they come to John, too. Isn’t that something? These religious people come to John despite the insults he hurls at them – “You brood of vipers” – you family of deadly snakes!

Now, we don’t know exactly why members of the religious establishment show up – maybe they want to gain favor from the crowds of “ordinary” people – maybe they’re just curious about why John’s “church attendance” is so high.

Or maybe even these card-carrying members of the religious establishment knew deep down that they were heading the wrong way, that, with God’s help, they, like all of us, must change direction, must repent before it’s too late.

Over and over, John announced to the crowds, “Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.”

And, of course, that will be Jesus’ proclamation, too.

“Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.”

Since John was such a powerful and oddly attractive figure, there were people back in the first century who thought that he might be the long-awaited messiah.

We talked about that for a while at our Wednesday Bible Study and it was unanimous that we’re glad that it’s Jesus, not John, who is the messiah.

We resisted John’s name-calling. And we noted that John is not quite right in his predictions and expectations of the messiah.

Yes, Jesus will be our judge.

Yes, there will be consequences for our actions.

But throughout the gospels, Jesus’ judgment is always shaped by mercy.

There’s no winnowing fork to be found.

Jesus dines regularly with the wrong sorts of people – the prostitutes, the tax collectors, even the occasional Pharisee - the people John might have considered prime candidates to spend eternity burning in the unquenchable fire.

Jesus tells the finger-pointers that, unless they are without sin, they’d better drop their stones. And Jesus tells the sinner to simply go and sin no more.

And from the cross, Jesus even asks God the Father to forgive those who turned against him, who were mocking and killing him.

Jesus was not exactly the messiah that John had imagined and expected - and that is very good news indeed.

We only know a little about John the Baptist’s life and message but as I’ve sat with him during this past week, I’ve wondered about all those people who repented, and came to get dunked by him in the Jordan.

What happened to them?

Did anyone or anything sustain them in their new life, or did they eventually slide back to their same old ways?

And, it won’t shock you that as I’ve sat with John the Baptist this week, I’ve also reflected on… Baptism – which we do just a little differently than John!

One of my favorite parts of our Baptism service is the candle.

We light it from the Paschal Candle, symbolizing the Light of Christ, and hold it in front of the newly baptized - usually a young child.

No matter what’s happened so far – anything from screaming to snoozing – the candle always gets their attention.

I hold the candle before them and say:

“You are the light of the world. Let your light shine so that others may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

Before I can get through all that, the child is usually reaching out for the candle, irresistibly drawn to the light.

That little candle is for the person just baptized but it’s also for all of us – it’s a reminder of our own Baptism – a reminder that we have been given the Light of Christ.

John warned of unquenchable fire but Jesus is the Light, guiding us as we make our way through the many challenges and troubles of our lives.

Jesus is the Light, calling us to repent and change our ways, yes, but also offering forgiveness when we inevitably stumble, get turned around, and need to start all over again.

Jesus is the Light, giving us hope – that even when the worst things happen we are not alone – we are never alone – and the God of hope will not let go of us, no matter what.

Jesus is the Light, inspiring us let our light shine – a light, which contrary to the song, is neither little nor really ours.

Jesus is the Light, inspiring us to shine our big light into an often shadowy world – inspiring us to open our doors to new friends from faraway lands, to sacrifice some of our money and time to help people in need have a nice Thanksgiving and Christmas, to reach out to the people we know are suffering, holding out our hands in friendship and love.

John was a great and powerful prophet, but Jesus is the Light.

So today, just like that, it’s the Second Sunday of Advent.

We give thanks for John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus, calling people to repent because the kingdom of God has come near.

But, most of all, today and every day we give thanks for Jesus – Jesus, the Light – the Light of the World.

Amen.