

When I was newly ordained, I was teaching theology to freshmen and sophomores at Bishop Guilfoyle Catholic High School in Altoona, Pa. One day there was a leak somewhere, and my class was moved into a vacant biology classroom, where the professor kept a big rat snake that he would feed once a week with a live mouse. I said to the students, who largely didn't give a whip about theology, "I'm jealous of that snake. I never get the class' undivided attention like your biology professor does when he feeds that snake." And one of the smart-alecks said, "You could, Father, if you could swallow a mouse." I told the kid he was going straight to hell, in a Christian way, of course!

I mentioned last Sunday that we can't get to Christmas without dealing with John the Baptist. Well, he's at it again. John gives specific actions that need to be performed to prepare for the Messiah. But what John asks us to do seems almost trivial compared with the sweeping claims made for God's actions by John – God remaking the whole world and all in it – and sending His Anointed One, the Savior, the Christ, to redeem it.

John says simply, "Whoever has 2 shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same." Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher, what should WE do?" "Collect no more than you are authorized to collect." Soldiers asked, "What about us?" "Don't cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay."

So God is shaking the heavens and bringing down the fire of judgment, and all the crowds must do is 'share,' and the tax collectors ought to be 'fair.' The soldiers were told not to 'push people around.' I wonder how many of them were actually there?!

These ethical demands seem rather modest compared with John's opening, visionary, apocalyptic announcement that we heard last week. Perhaps this is the key to John's good news: in the coming of Jesus Christ, God is doing some cosmic, sweeping, earth-shaking work. And yet God asks us, in response to Jesus' advent, to do some rather small, ordinary works of charity that just about anyone can perform with a little effort. Perhaps we ordinary people ought to take some comfort that the fruits worthy of repentance are not spectacular, heroic feats of saintliness. John tells his hearers that they have the wherewithal to respond to the coming of the Christ right here, right now, in their ordinary, everyday lives. They, in their own ordinary way, in responding to Christ's advent, can respond to God's turn toward us.

It's also interesting that John not only speaks to the 'crowds' but also specifically calls out the corrupt tax collectors, as well as even the Gentile Roman soldiers. All, even those outside the bounds of Israel, are being called to repent. Perhaps that rather universal, big tent approach is why Luke quotes Isaiah saying that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God." (3:6). Many have noted that, throughout Luke-Acts, there is stress upon the universal scope of the salvation of God.

I find it curious that John doesn't tell the tax collectors to quit working for the Romans and their Jewish collaborators, nor are the soldiers called to quit serving Caesar and his empire. Both the despised tax collectors and the hated soldiers are called to ethical transformation in their daily workday lives. Even they can be part of the coming reign of God, depending upon how they turn around (what metanoia, repent literally means), and show lives that demonstrate they really mean to repent. Repentance is something we do, not in church, but something that we do in the real world of economics and social relations. And how is

this announcement made – and the ethical demands delivered? Through a sermon, of all things. (adapted from Willimon, 15 December 2024, p. 33-34)

OK, so what? My second point. I have the weirdest job in the entire world. I preach. You have no idea how much whining, complaining, pleading and yes, even P-G rated cursing, sometimes goes into one of these 3 point tortures. “I can’t do this one more time,” I complain. “Read the commentaries, ask me for help, and get back to your computer,” God replies. “But I’ve preached on this like a million times – I’m out of stuff to say.” “But you promised to do this for a lifetime.” “Well I didn’t think I would last this long!” “That’s up to me to decide.” “Well, I’m getting kind of tired of dealing with all the complaints.” “Shut up and get back to your computer – I’ll give you some words.” “You’ve said that before – and it always gets me in trouble.” “One more whine out of you and I’m going to push my big SMITE button.” Ooh I HATE when He threatens the SMITE button. I’m afraid of the SMITE button. You’ll get a new pastor – hurray for you! – but I’ll be standing and hearing something like “Well the good news is – you’re never going to be cold again!” And all this was just THIS past week!

So I talk so that GOD can talk. That’s the way this is supposed to work. So, here’s my question: Why would anybody get dressed on a Sunday and go out into the wilderness at an inconvenient hour to hear a sermon like John the Baptist’s – Or John the Durbin’s? Luke says that “crowds” did. Even after John gave a pretty big sermon smackdown when he called the people a bunch of snakes – telling them to produce good fruit and change their lives. And John said “Don’t even think about saying “I was raised in a good Jewish home and I come to synagogue every Sabbath.” John said “If you don’t shape up, God can raise up children from the stones lying on the ground! The ax will cut down any tree that doesn’t bear good fruit and throw it into the fire!” Come on, you have to admit -- I’ve never preached THAT tough!

Well, here’s the problem. We can’t speak gospel to ourselves. Nobody’s born knowing Jesus. Nothing about Christianity is innate. None of you are here this evening(morning) listening to me – shallow, spineless, wimpy successor to John the Baptist – because you came to your senses, saw the light, and figured out Jesus Christ is Lord.

You are here because you heard. A flawed, finite, human being like John the Baptist tried to tell flawed, finite, utterly human you the truth about God (otherwise known as Jesus Christ), and you said, “Keep talking, this is fascinating!” And there’s no way for you to hear without a preacher. Romans 10, look it up!

We come to this truth empty-handed. Someone has got to hand it over and tell us the truth we can’t come up with on our own. The Christian life is training in receptivity, receiving Christ from the hands of another.

I know many walk away from parishes I have served. They mutter “I just can’t worship God in a church that talks about things that make me uncomfortable, bores me with three points, preaches a reality beyond my media bubble, personal piety, and political ideology., and actually asks me to change!”

Give me a break. I’ve spent my life preaching almost every week. A homily is basically saying “Hey, let’s have a conversation you have been avoiding all week, using some of your best defenses to protect yourself from the truth. But now you’re in church. Strap yourself in. Ushers, bolt the doors. Now, let’s talk turkey about what life – specifically eternal life -- is all about.”

There’s a powerful policing trying to keep us from hearing this truth. We have to get dressed and come here at an inconvenient hour to hear countercultural truth like the gospel.

OK, before I go on to my final point, a nod to GAUDETE, REJOICING Sunday. I'm offering you a conversation starter when you find yourself bored to death at a Christmas party. Ask the person who is boring: "What is THALASSOPHOBIA? My suspicion is that they won't know. Then you can look really smart by explaining that THALASSA means 'sea,' and PHOBOS means 'fear,' so thalassophobia is 'fear of the sea.' This is a legitimate phobia. The ocean can be a place of danger and death. Take to the water, and you have to deal with waves, wind, tides, currents, rocky shorelines and ever-changing weather conditions. And then hit them with the kicker -- So, do you know what lies at the bottom of the ocean and twitches? Anyone? A NERVOUS WRECK.

Third, why did so many Americans not come back to church after the pandemic? They were fatigued, traumatized, craving healing, compassion, and consolation. Sure, that happens here. But that's not the main point of the church. The main question before the church on any Sunday? "Any word from the Lord?" The church is about business even more important than healing: we are about hearing.

Sure, Jesus was a healer, but once, when they brought to Him the sick, Jesus said, "I've not come to heal but, to preach. I'm better even than a doctor. I'm a preacher." (Mk 1:38) – look it up!

It seems that Jesus believed that the worst sickness of all is not to hear the truth in a world full of lies.

The martyr to the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, said, "Preaching allows the risen Christ to walk among His people." I love that image, and I've actually seen it, even from the pulpit. I've watched Christ roam, make a move toward you, whisper truth even your best friend wouldn't dare to tell you, lay a job on you too big for your abilities. Jesus rips a sermon out of my hands and romps wildly among you, saying things to you I'm too cowardly to say, sending you on errands to places unsafe.

I've watched Him make His move and think, "Jesus, that guy will only disappoint you. He said he wanted to change his life but it's still a mess. Last year, he promised a big contribution to cover up for all the years of giving nothing, but it didn't happen. Put him down. Back away. He'll only disappoint."

"Don't you tell me to whom I can preach," says Jesus. "I'll talk to whom I talk – in spite of your boring three points! Really, can't you come up with something more creative? And speaking to the obstinate, willfully hard-of-hearing is what I do. READ YOUR BIBLE, Durbin!"

Again, Bonhoeffer: "There's only one preacher: Christ. And He WILL preach."

Spoiler alert: shortly after his Advent sermon, even though King Herod loved to listen to John preach, he cut off John's head (Mk 6:20) – you can look it up! Why? Because John said things that Herod didn't want said. A preacher with the guts to criticize a right-wing politician? Hey, it was a long time ago, and it was Judea, not North Carolina!

Then, after King Herod beheaded John the Baptist to silence this meddlesome preacher, we got organized and nailed preacher Jesus to a cross to shut Him up. Didn't work. Took Jesus only 3 days to resume the conversation: "Like I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted by crucifixion..." The sermons continued, the conversation between us and God resumed. God refuses to let us determine the boundaries of divine/human discourse.

Hey, I know I'm no John the Baptist. I'm not the most courageous of preachers. But that doesn't mean we're safe. God isn't stumped by any preacher's homiletical ineptitude, not even one stuck in a three-point rut. God refuses to let preachers censor the conversation between God and His people. We can shut

our eyes but not our ears. Christ loves us by talking to us, usually before we ask for it. John the Baptist all over again. We have been warned. Even though you may not care for me and are unimpressed by this sermon, God might be saying something to you right now, something you'd rather not hear. It's not up to you. God slipping through our defenses, saying things to us that we would never say to ourselves, our soul, addressed, divine/human discourse let loose in our soul....all through this stupid preaching. And that now, at last, this drivel is complete, let us all say AMEN! (all of this taken and adapted from Willimon, 15 December 2024, PULPIT RESOURCE, p. 34-35)

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