

“Second Week of Advent: Being Disconcerted by John the Baptist” by Jill Joseph

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Advent 2

So now it is Saturday noon, and I can focus on preparing this homily, at last.

Focus. I need to focus, I need to forget.....

Forget about the plan developed on Friday afternoon that I'm to fly to Abu Dhabi for a two-day meeting, leaving tomorrow afternoon. Forget that my passport is somewhere in the hands of Federal Express between California and Washington, DC.

Forget the fight with a colleague who is too powerful and too passive aggressive and in response to whom I get way too agitated.

Forget the big mistake I made it an e-mail and how many problems that may have caused, and the need to apologize to scattered colleagues across the country.

Forget the tidy, commercial apple pie from Costco sitting in my car waiting for the dinner at the Stewards meeting tonight because the pile of work on my desk simply precludes preparing the lovely dish that I wanted to bring as a small token of my deep appreciation to those who will receive me as a steward tonight.

I need to forget that I'm tired, distracted, agitated, and confused.

This is the second week of Advent, my favorite liturgical season, pregnant with expectation and hope and lovely music and candlelight. I can think of no more wonderful task than being asked to provide an Advent sermon.

So...it is Saturday noon and now is the time for inspiration and profundity, for the gifts of the spirit, or at least the ability to prepare 15 minutes that make sense to you my beloved friends to whom I am to preach.

Let me begin by saying that John the Baptist, introduced in today's reading, is one of my favorite Scriptural characters. He is cranky, loud, somewhat frightening, probably unbathed and slightly stinky. He is at least vaguely rebellious and one

could reasonably argue that he accomplished little or even failed miserably. He died a nasty death.

He is the perfect antidote to saccharine Christmastide spirituality and secular consumerism.

Many times over the years I have tried to meditate on the image of the newborn Christ child lying in that manger, with the adoring animals and angels and shepherds. But John always messes it up. As I try to approach the stable with slightly downcast eyes and participate in the reverence, he bursts on the scene in that camel hair coat crying aloud for repentance, warning of wrath and talking of trees to be cut down at the root. Screaming about vipers. Offering baptism in a river at a time of year when I'm thinking about snowfall and decorating fir trees.

So disconcerting!

Is it possible the disconcerting isn't so bad? Let me go further: I certainly hope disconcerting isn't so bad because my life continues to be disconcerting.

It seems to me that John the Baptist looms as the powerful fulcrum of many things. In the Eastern Christian traditions he is recognized as the last of the Hebrew Testament prophets and brings us to the Christ who ushers in a new testament. Certainly for Jesus his encounter with John was the turning point between a private life and his brief public ministry. Finally, I would suggest that John sits between our yearning

and the reality of our Christian life. He brings an early (and disconcerting) message about what the new kingdom will bring and how it will confound our yearnings and call us into new life.

Let's begin with the yearnings. Isaiah speaks to us eloquently in this season of looking for good news. He portrays a world in which righteousness and equity shall be our home on earth, in which justice will prevail. He speaks of abiding peace with the haunting images of toddlers who play safely with deadly snakes and of a little child leading a joyous company of the hunter and the hunted bedded down together. He tells us our God will judge not by what is seen or what is heard and that from root and stump shall grow a small tender shoot, but that alone will be the sign of our new dwelling place that is glorious.

What a world that would be! And how could we not yearn for that rather than for the realities of oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico and cholera in Haiti and quibbling over the realities of climate change, and the death of too many children at too young an age simply because they haven't enough to eat. Of mounting animosity toward immigrants and Muslims here at home.

But John does not ask us to yearn. Rather, he demands that we "repent", an important word that has almost been trivialized by overuse in accusatory theology and televangelist sermons.

In Hebrew, there are two words that are often translated as repentance. The first, "*nicham*", is best translated as sorrow

or grief. Perhaps the concept of contrition comes close. It is an interior mourning over oneself, a sadness that I was not the person I wanted to be, the person I had to be, the person I promised to be. "*Chuva*" is the other word and it represents not feeling, but simple and easily available action. It literally means, "to turn". Repentance is different from depression because the sense of grief is balanced by the knowledge that all I need do is to turn. Turn away from. Turn back to. Turn once. Turn again. Turn as often as needed. And in turning, the vistas change, something new is seen, there is another way forward. And this change is immediately available to us. All we need do is turn even as we mourn.

John also counsels us that we are to, "bear fruit worthy of repentance". That sorrow and that turning are to set us on a new path to the new Kingdom of God, or as it might more accurately translated, "new empire of God" for the word we usually translate as "kingdom" is exactly the same use for "empire", as in Roman empire. And what will happen there, in the new empire of God?

This was the question of tremendous importance to those who followed John and later Jesus. All about them was the grandeur of imperial power and success. Of worldly success. Of resort cities built for the Romans and those who catered to them. Of conniving and compromised rulers. Accommodation, if not capitulation, was clearly one choice of a future.

The other was rebellion. The weight of Rome lay heavy on the children of Israel. Too many were too poor. Too many had been murdered. Too many were without hope. It had happened before, and even now our Jewish neighbors re-tell that story

at this time of Hanukkah . The Jewish Temple had been seized by Syrian-Greek soldiers and dedicated to the worship of Zeus and 167 years before the birth of Christ the observance of Judaism was made an offense punishable by death with all Jews to worship Greek gods. But there was a rebellion by Mattathias, a high priest, and his family who escaped to the mountains where they were joined by others and became known as the Maccabees. Might rebellion be successful again?

Certainly the Roman overlords were concerned that John would foment rebellion and this concern clearly contributed to his capture and execution.

But between capitulation and rebellion, another voice and another way was given to us. From the beginning, it was disconcerting. Unmarried women and old women gave birth. Angels and stars welcomed those unwelcome in the temple, both non-Jewish astrologers and ragtag shepherds (well characterized politically and socially by Garrison Keillor as the "parking lot attendants of the first century"). Meals were eaten with the disreputable. There was no rebellion and no capitulation. There was a lonely death on a cross among thieves....but that is another part of our story that belongs to another time of year.

For now, I am left with my disconcerting life in which I see sometimes more clearly than I wish how much I need to repent, how much I have to grieve over my own failings and how often I need to turn back to the one who calls me.

There is so much that I do not know. I will tell you that I

do not know if I should travel to Abu Dhabi tomorrow. I will confess to you that I do not know if I am traveling as the eldest and all too insecure child from a poor family taking barely hidden delight in privilege and visibility, or traveling as an advocate for families and their children for whom a new health system might be built. Probably it is both.

I will confess to you that I am both appalled that the government of Abu Dhabi pays for my business-class travel, and that some part of me eagerly anticipates this privilege that I will also decry. I will confess to you that there is little good that I do in my life is not contaminated by my own pettiness and selfishness.

But it is Advent, a time in which it may be alright to be disconcerted and confused.

Time is ever tilting across the fulcrum of our hearts from what we yearn for with passionate simplicity on one side to what we must accomplish amid the rubble of our own lives on the other.

John stands there: insistent and demanding. He makes me uncomfortable. I hope he also gives me the grace to grieve and to turn, time and again, into this new and disconcerting empire of the grace and love.