

Haydenville Congregational Church

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December 5, 2010

Matthew 3:1-12

“The Jesus Movement”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Today is the second Sunday in Advent. And here in the Lectionary we encounter John the Baptizer. Why John? And why now?

During Advent we hear about John baptizing people in the river Jordan for several reasons...one is that Advent is the time when we prepare for the arrival of Jesus. We are waiting, watching, getting ready...like you stare at a pregnant woman thinking any time now, maybe this minute, maybe the baby will come. We are waiting and watching. Advent is like a little Lent—but we are not preparing for Jesus’ death, we are readying ourselves for his birth.

And so the Lectionary gives us today’s reading about John the Baptizer because John is also waiting, watching, preparing for the arrival of Jesus. John is busy baptizing people in the Jordan and yet he continually and faithfully gestures toward Jesus. John quotes the words of the prophet Isaiah, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

John anticipates Jesus’ arrival and he says clearly: the one coming after me is more powerful than I—HE is the one we are waiting for.

Listen to John’s words: *I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

Now John himself was no slouch, he was like a rock star—crowds gathered, people mobbed him waiting to experience this odd ritual where they were dunked in the river as they confessed and were cleansed of their sins. And so John saying: the one who comes after me is the important one and I am not worthy to carry his sandals is a remarkable admission. John is saying I am the prelude, the warm-up act, the main act is yet to come.

Our reading for today from the Book of Matthew that tells of John's baptisms in the river gives us the opportunity to anticipate with John the arrival of Jesus. But today's reading does something more significant than that—it opens the door for us to look at both men, John and Jesus, and their ministries and their messages and see how these two great leaders were so very different from one another. Today's reading, given to us as a little gift on this second Sunday in Advent, allows us to question: how and why were John and Jesus different and what lessons do their messages hold for us today?

To contrast these two prophets let's first consider John. He was a scruffy aesthetic. He lived in the wilderness, he wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt cinched around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. John was a loner—he was on his own living simply and starkly on what could be gathered and eaten.

Also, John was eccentric and bombastic. He was not interested in winning friends or influencing people shall we say. In today's reading, John calls his fans “a brood of vipers,” he insults their ancestors, and he asks them in what was probably a scornful and booming voice, “Why are you here?”

John was not one to mince words and he used violent imagery in his speech....

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.

Now consider Jesus. Unlike John, Jesus was not scruffy and he was not an aesthetic. A major part of Jesus' ministry was his table fellowship—he often invited people to eat with him and he invited himself to people's homes for meals. A main theme for Jesus was inclusion and hospitality. Remember that on his final night on earth, Jesus gave his followers a ritual with bread and wine to remember him.

And, unlike John, Jesus was not a loner. At the very start of his ministry, Jesus gathered companions around him to walk with him, converse with him and share in his life. And, unlike John, Jesus was consistently and profoundly non-violent, even in his speech. Yes, Jesus used strong and powerful language but unlike John he did not insult or threaten his listeners.

These differences are interesting and noteworthy but the most significant difference between John and Jesus was not in their dress, their diet or their lifestyle. The most significant difference between John and Jesus was in their theology.

John believed in and preached about a punitive God. John's God was vengeful and punishing. Even when talking about Jesus' coming, John spoke in absolutes that carried frightening images: *His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*

John accepted the theology prevalent at the time that believed God rewarded or punished God's people according to their obedience or disobedience to the covenant made with Israel. John believed that God meted out rewards and punishments and that the Israelites were living miserably under Roman occupation as their punishment for being unfaithful to their covenant. John believed that the people needed to repent. Notice the first word out of John's mouth in today's passage, *In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*

Later in the passage John says *I baptize you with water for repentance....* John's message was you are sinful, repent so you will no longer be punished. And notice John says *the kingdom of heaven is near...*

Jesus did not speak of God as punitive, violent or punishing and this represented a huge paradigm shift within Judaism. Jesus spoke of a non-vindictive God who loved God's people. Jesus' references to God were new and startling. According to Jesus, God was not counting people's sins but showering blessings upon God's beloved sons and daughters. Jesus told his followers, *love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you* and the reason he gives is *so that you may be children of God in heaven, for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*

Jesus differed from John by altering, in a fundamental way, how people conceived of and experienced God. And Jesus extended this understanding of God by preaching that the kingdom of God was not NEAR, it was HERE. Jesus believed that what by **HE and his followers did**—by their words and actions—they could create the kingdom of God on earth. This was a dramatic departure from what John preached and what was accepted Jewish thought at the time.

Listen to Jesus' words found in Luke 11:20, "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the Kingdom of God has come to you."

In contrast to the message people heard from John, Jesus tried to explain to his followers that they/we PARTICIPATE WITH GOD to create the kingdom of God

on earth. Jesus' message was that the kingdom of God was not something that was coming, it was here, now. The kingdom of God was not imminent—yet to arrive—but present, interactive, participatory and collaborative.

Years later St. Augustine summed up Jesus' message by saying, "God without us, will not. We, without God, cannot."

The differences in philosophy, theology and approach between John and Jesus are important but their great difference is reflected in their legacy. When John was baptizing people in the river Jordan he was the only show in town.

There weren't baptizing stations up and down the Jordan so that those wishing to be baptized could simply go to the one nearest their home. No. To be baptized you went to John and John alone. To stop the Baptist Movement, Herod only had to execute John. The movement could linger on in memory, but since the movement depended on John's life and John's actions, it ended with John's death.

Jesus on the other hand traveled widely from place to place and continually empowered his disciples to move out into the countryside and do what he himself was doing. Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan sums the difference between the two men's approach by saying: "John had a monopoly but Jesus had a franchise." John did what John did alone. But Jesus sent his companions out to do what he did...he gave them the power, the confidence, the spirit, and the wisdom to act in his name. The Jesus Movement was based on empowerment, collaboration and participation. The Jesus Movement looked and acted like the kingdom of God that Jesus preached about.

John had a monopoly but Jesus had a franchise and that made all the difference and that changed the world. The Jesus Movement was not Jesus-dependent. Jesus said the Kingdom of God is here—now go out and create it every day. Go! (It's like the Nike slogan, just do it!)

In fact, Jesus does not just say go, just do it, create the kingdom of God on earth, do what I have done, he says you will do even greater works than I!

Listen to the Gospel of John 14:12

*Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, **will do greater works than these**, because I am going to the Father.*

Those of us who have been watching the DVD Bible Study series called "First Light" know that John Dominic Crossan says that Jesus empowering his followers to take charge and change the world is THE significant difference between the two prophets.

My dear brothers and sisters, Jesus began a movement that lives on today. He touched and blessed his followers and told them to do good work in his name and create the kingdom of God on earth, here and now. Not someday. Not in the future. Now. Today. Every day. Create the kingdom of God on earth.

In the Jesus Movement, Jesus touched his disciples with his hands and empowered them to act in the service of God, to carry forward his work. And then Jesus' disciples touched people with their hands and instructed them to act in the service of God, to carry forward the work. And those people touched people with their hands and told them to act in the service of God and carry forward the work. And in that way, the Jesus Movement has lived on from generation to generation, from century to century, from millennia to millennia.

And I am part of that movement, and you are part of that movement. Twelve years ago tomorrow, on December 6, 1998, I was ordained. During my ordination, 40 robed clergy gathered around me as I knelt and they touched me with their hands and told me to act in the service of God, to create the kingdom of God on earth and to carry on Jesus' work. This ritual of touch is called apostolic succession—the work, the mantle, the empowerment, the legacy is passed from Jesus follower to Jesus follower to Jesus follower.

And so the Jesus Movement continues, and YOU are a part of it. You are a part of apostolic succession...for I have been touched and I have touched you with my hands and you are empowered to do the work of Jesus. I have touched you in the Recovery Room at Bay State Hospital and at Linda Manor Nursing Home, I have touched you in Deacons meetings and at church suppers, I have touched you by your bedside at Cooley Dickinson Hospital and at the Calvin Coolidge Rehab Center. I have touched you in Shepherds meetings and at Exploring Membership Classes, I have touched you at your kitchen tables and in your gardens. I have touched your babies when they were baptized and your children at Coffee Hour. And I will touch you again today when you receive Communion.

You are a part of the Jesus Movement. Jesus did not keep his work to himself. Unlike John the Baptist, Jesus said to his followers: go out and do this work in my name. And, he said, you will do even greater works than I have done.

Jesus believes in us. He has empowered us to do his work in the world. We are part of his movement—a movement that lives on through our actions and our words, our struggles and our hospitality, our witness and our hands.

Jesus touched his apostles and they touched more followers, and those followers touched others and they in turn touched others.

And so my friends, Jesus has touched our lives, not just metaphorically but literally. And by doing so he has empowered us to go into the world in his name and do God's work.

We are the hands of God. And we remember the words of St. Augustine:
"God without us, will not. We, without God, cannot."

Amen.

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