

Covenant Word

Past Despair to Abounding Hope

Isaiah 11:1-10, Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12, 11:2-11

*A Message by
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Sunday
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They say that southerners are the only folk who take their crazy relatives and parade them around in public. I find this to be particularly true at Christmas. In the movie, "Christmas Vacation," the Griswold's find that their crazy relatives have come for an extended holiday stay. As the tension builds with too much family under one roof and Clark

Griswold does not receive his long-awaited Christmas bonus, crazy Uncle Eddie kidnaps Clark's boss, hog-ties him, and holds him hostage in order to secure the annual bonus for his beloved brother-in-law.

Now John's business was repentance. ... You see, when John waded into the waters of the Jordan, he met people there to clean them up, to scrub them clean, to hose them down. He believed that the coming of God was imminent, and we were to get cleaned up for the occasion.

While we may not have had such a dramatic experience as this, we know what it is like to mentally prepare to be with our families. We take our plates through the Christmas buffet, loaded with scrumptious food, only to pass by crazy Aunt Diane's congealed salad, of which you have been, gratefully, forewarned. It happens to be aqua colored this year rather than her usual pink. Then you gather around the table for the Christmas feast and even though she arrived with slurred speech, we watch as yet one more glass of eggnog is passed to crazy ol' Aunt Libba! Then there is the relative who every year tells the same exaggerated stories that appear to have no real purpose for the telling except for the teller to hear himself talk. We nod, pretending to listen, saying to ourselves, "crazy ol' Uncle David." Or perhaps, like Lloyd and me, you have been the newly engaged couple aglow with the purity of your love. In front of the entire assembled extended family, you are given a gift. You open it only to find a copy of Master's and Johnson's manual for marital bliss!! While you try to discreetly put it under your chair, you are encouraged by the gift giver to hold it up for all to see. What is there left to say but, "that's just crazy ol' Uncle Frank!"

I mention these characters because I wonder if Jesus

felt this way about John the Baptist: "Here is my crazy cousin John, eating honey and wild locust, donning animal skins, and immersing just about anybody who comes out to the wilderness to hear his wild proclamations of things yet to come."

Like our relatives that we endure during the holidays, the gospel writers let us know that we cannot avoid this crazy cousin. While Luke is the only gospel that hints at their kinship, every single gospel writer introduces Jesus by talking about John. This sort of coverage in holy text means that, in some way or another, the mysterious workings of God are afoot. John stands like a sentinel to the doorway of understanding about Jesus. If we cannot handle John, then we certainly cannot handle the One who comes after him. As different as they turn out, John's judgment precedes Jesus' grace. They go together, like turkey and dressing, because those who know nothing of judgment need to experience nothing of grace. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "A Cure for Despair," Teaching Sermons on Suffering: God in Pain)

Now John's business was repentance. It was what his baptism was all about. His baptism was not about becoming a Christian, so it is important

for us not to confuse his baptism with the baptism that we practice symbolizing the death and resurrection of Jesus. You see, when John waded into the waters of the Jordan, he met people there to clean them up, to scrub them clean, to hose them down. He believed that the coming of God was imminent, and we were to get cleaned up for the occasion. (Taylor)

John was so serious about his message of repentance that he was willing to do whatever it took to wake the people up from their sleepwalking. So while we may look at his methods and think, "Crazy ol' cousin John," the truth is that his eccentricities came from his unwillingness to give in to despair. He was all about a message of extreme hope.

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The Hebrew word for *hope* has at its root a meaning that is to twist and twine. It is combining all the possibilities that this good thing will happen and this bad thing will not happen, a hundred little

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.**
Sarah Shelton



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strands of hope, that get twisted together to make a cable of hope strong enough to pull ourselves along through life. Unlike John, our hopes tend to stay within the realm of reasonableness. Even our most extravagant hopes are not very extravagant. We are prudent and careful because we do not want to court despair. We do not want to risk becoming the ones who wait, helpless and irrelevant, for a deliverance that never comes. To hope for more than the possible is a kind of madness...a madness that characterizes crazy ol' cousin John! (Frederick Buechner, "The Sought," The Hungering Dark)

For you see, John's message was that a new life could be had, before they even dried off from their baptism, if they would just repent. When the crowds heard the challenge to repent, it was received as a promise not a threat. It meant if they were willing, the past would lose its power over them. What they had done, what they had said, what they had made happen and what had happened to them would no longer control their lives. They would no longer hear those nagging voices in their heads that told them how bad or how ruined they were. Instead, they would be free to begin again, only this time, they could listen to the voice of God that speaks only of how blessed and beloved they are. (Taylor) And so they walked for miles, and stood around even after they had visited the waters, to hear John say it over and over again, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

When we hear that word "repentance," however, we begin to squirm in our guilt covered seats. It brings all sorts of images to mind of evangelists and preachers and well-meaning parents who feel free still to tell us how rotten we are. Little do they know that we carry enough negative messages within our own souls to remind us how selfish, sinful, and deeply defective we are. We are told that the answer to this predicament is to take our pride and arrogance and dump it all on the floor so that we can stamp out the root of so much evil. (Taylor)

I have, however, met with enough people privately, and sought enough personal counsel myself, come to the realization that our pride and arrogance may not be the issue at all. The themes I consistently hear are: things will never change for me; or I will never be able to change; or no matter what we say or do we are stuck in this mess someone else has made of us; there is no hope, no beginning again, or no chance for a new life. As I listen, it would seem to me that arrogance and pride are not the issues. The issue is the lack of hope...the despair of it all. (Taylor)

I cannot tell you how many people I know who are all but dead with despair. It is the struggle of this season, is it not, to keep our personal despair at bay so that we can be merry and bright? Despair does not just come in one form, but it happens in all sorts of ways:

- the recurrent ghosts of our abusers
- the diagnosis of cancer or HIV or Alzheimer's
- the rejection letters
- the loss of job or the non-existent challenge of our current position

the consistent struggle of the substances we are prone to

Abuse

the failed relationship

the age-old companion depression

On and on we could go only to realize that the American dream is often more about the boxed-in, locked-up, caught-in-the-treadmill prison places than the beauty of Christmas that is scenically portrayed on the seasonal cards

we send one another. (Anna Carter Florence, "Preaching the Lesson," Lectionary Homiletics, December 16, 2007)

Ol' cousin John, in spite of his hopeful call to repentance, knew about these places as well. Imprisoned by Herod and soon to be beheaded, John begins to ask questions that he would never have asked if he had remained free in the wilderness of the Jordan to preach about repentance. Instead, he made the mistake of judging some of those who had power. Stronger than his statements about the Pharisees and Sadducees being a brood of vipers, from his mouth also came a scathing rebuke of Herod for taking his brother's wife as his own. So from the dark corner of his prison cell with the faint clink of his restraining chains and the sharpening of the executioner's sword in the background, John sends a despairing question from prison to Jesus, "Are you the one we wait for, or not?"

It is the same question we ask when we watch the evening news and there is more bombing in the Middle East. Before the image of the broken soldiers on stretchers has time to register in our brains, much less our hearts, there is fresh outrage pouring out of the mouths of politicians who are seemingly more concerned about their popularity ratings in the upcoming elections than they are about our troops or the people freezing to death under thin blankets, or the apartment fire where struggling families have lost everything they own, or the most recent murder in town. Sometimes, I do not make it to the weather and sports. I turn off the TV to sit in the dark and to wonder, "So Jesus, are you the one or not?" (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Are You the One?" Mixed Blessings)

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It is the question we ask when the office phones ring and the buzzer from the lobby goes off again and again. We find that we receive approximately 8 assistance calls a day plus about two a day who physically show up asking for help. These are the tough ones, because we have to look into their eyes to say "No, we can't help," while their children cling to their legs or they cough uncontrollably or they cry. Then there are the weekly

findings of those who are sleeping on our porches, going through our dumpster and who occasionally seek shelter inside the dumpster. They come in such numbers that they begin to look alike: dim, wrinkled, bloodshot, unshaven, and ashamed. We know what they need before they say a word.

Like the cooperating agencies in our area, we have nothing to give to the vast majority. No funds. No food. So we turn them away, apologizing for

our inability to help this time. After the fifth or sixth one, we begin to experience hard feelings of how dare they have needs greater than what we can give! (Taylor, "Are You the One?") We show them out, come back to the dry, safe and warm office and wonder, "Jesus, are you the one or not?"

The mentally challenged, the physically disabled, those who die prematurely...I could go on and on...Jesus, are you the one or not?

Yet, Jesus' answer to John's despairing question remains a hopeful one even for us. He tells John's disciples to tell John about all the things they *are* hearing and seeing. It may not be what they expected, but every now and then, in surprising places, marvelous things are happening. People who were blind to the love that is loose in the world have received their sight; people who were paralyzed with fear are limber with hope; people who were deaf from want of good news, are singing hymns of joy. "And best and most miraculous of all," Jesus says, "tell John that this is not the work of one lonely Messiah, but it is the work of God carried out by any and all who believe. Tell him, if you must, that yes, I am the one, but also tell him that he should search every face for traces of God. Don't get tripped up on me, because what is happening is bigger than any one of us. What is coming to pass is as big as the Kingdom of God and that brings abounding hope." (Taylor)

Jesus' radical answer points us to the hope of Advent that just maybe our world is not quite as bad off as we think. With eyes of faith, souls filled with expectancy, and hearts overflowing with love, we can hear a message of repentance with the same hope with which John spoke it. Then we begin to understand the truth of what Timothy Luke Johnson, professor of Emory's Candler School of Theology, said. "Faith does not know a different world from the one measured and calculated by science, but it knows the same world differently." (Dr. P.C. Enniss, "Peace is More Than a Christmas Wish," Day1.net)

Six year old Ruby Bridges obviously knew the world differently as she lived this truth out for us during the Civil Rights' Movement. (Story taken from Rev. P.C. Enniss' sermon, "Peace is more than a Christmas Wish," Day1.net) Ruby was the first African American child to integrate the New Orleans public schools. Every morning and every afternoon, Ruby would be taken by the hand of a federal marshal and escorted through the lines of angry parents who hurled insults, racial slurs, and violent words at her. As her presence incited the parents of the other children for weeks on end, almost every white family eventually withdrew their children from the school. For the better part of a

term, Ruby went to school all by herself.

The story caught the attention of Harvard child psychologist, Robert Coles, who went to New Orleans to spend time with Ruby and her parents. He interviewed Ruby's teacher and asked how she thought Ruby could tolerate such constant

adversity and abuse. The verbatim from Ruby's teacher reads like this: I was standing in the classroom looking out the window. I saw Ruby coming down the street

with the federal marshals on both sides of her. The crowd was there shouting as usual. A woman spat at Ruby, but missed. Ruby smiled at her. A man shook his fist at her. Ruby smiled. And then she walked up the steps, and she stopped and turned around and smiled one more time. You know what she told one of those marshals? She told him she prays for those people, the ones in that mob. She prays for them every night before going to sleep."

When Cole pressed Ruby about why she prayed, she said: "Because my mama said I should. ...I go to church. I go to church every Sunday, and we are told to pray for people, even bad people. ...I'm sure God knows what is happening. God's got a lot to worry about, but there's bad trouble here. God can't help but notice. He may not do anything right now, but there will come a day, like they say in church, there will come a day. You can count on it. That's what they say in church."

This is the optimistic message of John and Jesus as well. There will come a day when the Kingdom of God will reign completely. There will come a day when we will undeniably embrace our place as a treasured child of God's. There will come a day when the lame will walk, the blind will see, and the deaf will hear. There will come a day! And Advent tells us that we can count on it!

So at the risk of becoming crazy ol' Pastor Sarah within the family of God, I am, this Advent, counting on the hope that comes with John's repentance and with the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. What about you?

Oh Lord Our God

Just as You encouraged John the Baptist to look in the most unusual places to find the Kingdom at work, so we ask that you remove our blindness, so that we can see Your Spirit moving in our midst. Soften our hardened hearts that we might be instruments of Your peace. Open our hands to do Your work with willingness and generosity. Unplug our ears to the sounds of Your coming. And restore our spirits that we might share Your love as the hope of the world. Bring Your light into our darkness so that doubt is replaced with faith; despair is replaced with hope; fear is replaced with conviction, and dead-end street are opened with amazing possibilities. Help us to celebrate the joyful news that hope is born again through Your son and our savior, Jesus Christ, Amen