

Christmas in the Wilderness

Matthew 3:1-12

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United Church of Christ
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I.

Can you believe that Christmas Day is exactly three weeks from today? Depending upon your life stage, that realization may strike you differently? If you are a kid or a grandparent-type, the approach of Christmas – being with family, eating special things, opening presents – may bring excitement and joy. On the other hand, if you are a parent, or a minister for that matter, the increasing proximity of Christmas highlights how much there is still left to do. Whether anticipating good things to come or many things to do, our purpose during Advent worship is to pause and take it all in, not only the season we are in, but the story that informs it. In worship, we make a quantum leap, or, as it has been called variously in literature, we fall down the rabbit hole, walk into the wintery land at the back of the wardrobe, or run at the brick wall that leads to platform nine and three-quarters. During Advent, we enter a different story altogether, but not to escape reality. One of the beautiful paradoxes of faith is that by entering the story of Bible, which is both based in history and is also an act of imagination, we are thrust back into reality, but now with eyes and hearts and hands wide open.

II.

I want to spend some time thinking with you about how different John the Baptist is from Santa Claus. Of course, there are some similarities – they are both extremely popular, they both have large beards (at least, as most of us imagine them), and they both spend most of their time in desolate places – John in the desert and Santa in the arctic. Their differences are highlighted if you imagine them trading places. Can you see Santa in the Jordan Valley, his rosy cheeks getting redder and redder under the middle eastern sun? Standing waist-deep in the river, his red suit, patent leather boots, and furry hat get water-logged and cause him to sweat profusely. He tries his best to maintain a jolly mood, smiling and saying “Ho, ho, ho” to all the people who have come to him to *repent*, which means stating a desire to start again,

and to be *baptized*, a ritual that symbolizes putting to death old ways of being, and becoming reborn into new ways of being.

There's something a bit disingenuous about Santa's belly laugh in the face of desperate people seeking a new life.

He brought a huge bag of presents with him – it's just at the river's edge, but no one seems to want anything. Everyone seems content to be dunked and blessed.

John the Baptist doesn't fare too well doing Santa's job either.

Talk about inadequate dress, his camel hair tunic and leather belt are not the right attire for cross-continental sleigh journeys.

Fur-lined boots and a fuzzy hat would have been helpful to prevent frost-bitten extremities, and I mean *all* the extremities.

Of course, John doesn't mind getting dirty going up and down chimneys – he's never really had a proper bath.

But it is tedious work hauling around all those toys and gadgets, candies and pieces of coal.

Trying to keep track of naughty and nice, especially when most everyone lands somewhere in-between, sends John's head spinning.

Imagine John the Baptist and Santa the Claus meeting briefly as they trade back their places, each putting a hand on the other's shoulder, sharing a look that is a mixture of pity and appreciation, and then saying, "God bless you."

Walking away, they both mumble, "Better him than me."

III.

Two very different characters, two very different stories, two very different messages.

Santa comes to us a warm and generous saint, requiring nothing but our trust.

The rules are easy: behave well, sleep through the night, then wake up to presents and waffles.

Santa's is a message of love and grace and joy and belonging, along with a little bit of fatigue, reward, guilt and obligation.

John, by contrast is a rough and wild Hebrew prophet who doesn't mince words or even *try* to be nice.

"Repent" is his opening line, which is like saying, "Get it together, people."

His tone is urgent and abrasive: "The kingdom of heaven has come near," he says.

No one has authorized him to preach in this way – he is as un-credentialed as any of the prophets of Israel.

And with respect for his Jewish tradition, he doesn't give a name to the divine, which is why he says "kingdom of heaven" and not "kingdom of G-o-d."

John's message is harsh but hopeful, raw but real, demanding but demonstrably inclusive.

He attracts large crowds of people not only from Jerusalem, but from the entire region of Judea.

Villagers and scholars, farmers and priests come to the Jordan to confess their sins – to name the ways they had hurt others and not trusted God – and then to be baptized, to be plunged into and then pulled up from the murky river water with words of blessing and a charge to go and to conspire with the kingdom of heaven coming near.

But the Baptist's preaching about the kingdom of heaven has this added flavor to it: this time, John says, the kingdom of heaven comes close to us in the form of a human being just like us.

But this human's life and death will change everything.

His ministry will embody the inclusive justice and peace of God.

The Holy Spirit will be with him in such a powerful way, that he will baptize with fire, a fire that will spread the light of life and the heat of love while burning away all residue of hate and violence.

Even death will not contain the love of God at play in the life of this human one.

IV.

John's message isn't easy to hear, isn't the warm, cuddly, cinnamon-y message of modern Christmases, but it is the funding story of season of Advent.

So, *there* is another contrast: while Santa points back, helping us reminisce about the story of Jesus, not mention our own Christmases past,

John is always pointing forward, helping us anticipate the coming kingdom of heaven, a peaceful kingdom not in the form of a system, but in the form of a human, Jesus, whom we call Messiah or Christ.

I suppose storytellers know what they are doing when they cast characters like John the Baptist and Saint Nicholas in their respective roles.

I mean, can you imagine how we would celebrate Christmas today if we only had the example of John to go on?

We might wake up on Christmas morning, itchy in our camel hair pajamas with awkward leather belts knotted in front.

Padding barefoot down the hall, we'd come into a living room crowded with people – some we would know and some we wouldn't know, maybe some we wouldn't want to know.

And there we'd sit around, eating live grasshoppers drizzled with sticky wild honey – mmm, nothing says "holiday spirit" like yummy plump insect thoraxes.

Instead of wishing each other a “Merry Christmas” we’d remind each other, brusquely, to “Repent!”
Then, instead of opening presents, we’d all take a mid-winter swim in the Laguna. Chilly and mossy, we’d emerge from the water resolved to make a fresh start.

Christmas in the Wilderness.

I’m not sure I’m ready to shift the tradition, not ready to trade out SC for the J the B. But as Advent prepares us for Christmas, the Gospels insist we hear about the Jordan again, the story of a wild prophet and the kingdom of heaven come near. Perhaps *that* story will help to see the details of our own story anew. Like the chimney. The fire has burned, giving heat to the house. Now the chimney provides a way for the gifts of grace to come down, right here, into the middle of our togetherness.