

The Last Prophet Matthew 3:1-12

Last week, churches from around the world were preparing their sanctuaries for Advent or Christmas. Some decorated as a part of worship as we did, some had professional decorators, and some just turned decorating over to a faithful few. The wreaths, garlands, candles, lights, and Christmas trees put us all in a festive mood. Many of you have probably spent time this week or last week decorating your own homes. If you drive around town, you see holiday lights, Christmas trees, and outside blow up characters brightening our streets. The courthouse and grounds and streets of downtown look festive on a clear cold night. The stores are full of holiday shoppers looking for just the right gift. Friends and families are gathering, choirs are singing, and bells are ringing. And yet, in the midst of all our traditions and merry making, on the second Sunday of Advent every year, John the Baptist appears. He is not wearing a fur lined suit. He has on coarse camel hair tied with a leather strap. He does not have a smooth hair or a well-trimmed beard. He looks like a man who, well, lives in the wilderness. He has never cut his hair and he has never shaved or trimmed his beard. He is not munching down holiday cookies and egg nog. He lives on a diet of locust and honey. He isn't shouting "Merry Christmas!". He is telling us all we need to repent. He is not saying "Peace on earth, goodwill towards man." He is telling us that our world is messed up and it is about to change and we need to get ready. Honestly, I think we would rather have Santa Claus but God gives us John the Baptist.

His message is simple – change your life if you want to be ready for what is to come. Now let's admit that most of us would rather ignore this message. Yes, we know our world is messed up but we rather like the way our lives are. We are comfortable. We have dealt with our losses and reveled in our accomplishments. We have nice homes, full tummies, and good friends. We do not want our preacher to tell us everything is wrong and we certainly do not wish to listen to the message of John the Baptist. We would rather skip straight to Christmas and bypass John the Baptist but that would be like celebrating Easter without the crucifixion. John the Baptist is telling us that not all is right with the world. For those who are oppressed, those living in poverty, those who are hungry, and those who are being targeted and abused for the color of their skin, John is bringing good news. No wonder he had so many disciples. No wonder people flocked to experience the baptism of repentance. They were willing and ready to prepare the way for a new world order. The thought of new world ruled by a King of righteousness had to sound pretty appealing to someone who barely scraped by each day.

But Matthew adds a detail to this story that Mark and John overlook. There were more than non-churched sinners coming out to be baptized by John. There were also good God-fearing church folks wanting to be baptized. What is disturbing is that Matthew claims that John had good news for the sinners and bad news for

those who claimed they were already living right. In fact, John calls up some very graphic images. He claims the church leaders and priests and Elders resemble a brood of vipers trying to escape a forest fire. He wonders how they found out about his ministry. He knows they are relying on their heritage to save them but he reminds them that heritage means nothing to God. God can raise up a new generation of people to be the chosen ones. God does not need them as much as they need God. As they are baptized, they ask what to do next.

John gives them one instruction – bear fruit worthy of repentance. John was implying that the current crop of church leaders was falling short. They may have obeyed all the rules. They may have kept the traditions of the church. They may have even done a good deed or two but the fruit they had chosen to bear was not worthy of repentance. It was rotten fruit. They had not taken God seriously. They had not taken the promises seriously or the expectations seriously. John knew it and deep down, they knew it, too, or they would not have been seeking baptism from John.

As we take a hard look at ourselves and our church this blessed season, we need to ask ourselves this question – are we bearing fruit worthy of repentance? Are we taking God seriously? God has given us a job to do. We have very specific instructions - *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

American Christianity of today needs to take a hard look at the fruit we are bearing. Sometimes it seems that we are more like the Pharisees and the Sadducees than the disciples. The Pharisees and Sadducees were not evil people. They were leaders of the church who genuinely tried to do the right thing. The Pharisees loved the law. They believed the law was God's gift to the Hebrew people and that you proved your worthiness in upholding the law. But the law was more important to them than people. They condemned those who did not follow the law to the letter. They even condemned who by birth were born outside the law. They believed they were protecting the faith but the faith they were protecting was not real fruit. It was empty. It was not saving them much less anybody else. If the Pharisees were around today, they would be endlessly engaging in the culture wars. They would be trying to protect the faith from the very people Jesus came to save.

The Sadducees protected the traditions of the church. They were the people who protected the Temple and the Synagogue. They were the ones who made certain that the rituals were protected and that everyone did what they were supposed to do in the way they were supposed to do it. They were the leaders who made sure the altar cloth was the right color and the church calendar was maintained. They were not evil people either but at some point in time they had started believing that what was good for them was good for everybody else that

they lost the idea that God's love was not just for the insiders. God's love extends to everyone. They had forgotten that they were a blessing so they could be a blessing to those who did not know God. They had turned inward in their thinking and in their mission.

Has the average American Christian church done the same? If you were a non-church goer looking at modern Christianity would you not think that churches were about rules, regulations, traditions, and fighting culture battles. And they may not be wrong. If you look at the average church budget, you would see that the majority of the budget is focused on self-care and fellowship. Mainline churches have forgotten that we were created and exist for the people who are not yet here. Our mission is to reach out and embrace those on the fringes. And yet, those on the fringes are the very people that make us uncomfortable. We point our fingers at them and tell them they are supposed to live by our moral dictates when we do not even live by them ourselves.

What John the Baptist did not know and could not know is God's ultimate plan. He announced a new Kingdom but he was not sure what it would be. He did not know that he would lose his own life for his preaching. He also did not know the Jesus would do the same. He had no idea the price that would be paid for our salvation. He just gave them message as it was given to him – repent and bear fruit worthy of repentance for a new kingdom is coming. God is in the business of setting the world right.

Here, in this church, our church leaders decided to buck the trend. We decided that we would make certain our church bore fruit. We live in a town with the second highest poverty rate in Arkansas. The poverty rate in the US is 10.6%. In Arkansas, it is 15.7%. In Camden, it is 18.6%. 26% of the children under the age of 18 in our town live beyond the poverty rate. Last month, our federal government shutdown and many of our families and seniors who relied on the SNAP programs did not have money for food. Our staff and volunteers went to work. People gave. As a result, we fed a record 623 families in our food pantry. That exceeds our record by 100 families. We opened at night on the first Thursday of the month and gave out 9000 pounds of fresh fruit and vegetables. We fed over a thousand meals through Sue's Table and the Community Thanksgiving meal. And because you care, we did not run out of money doing it.

Why do we make these sacrifices? We know the price that would be paid for our salvation. We know what Jesus did for us and we fully understand we are called to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. We understand the call to love our neighbor. We know that learning to forgive is far more important than some of the tedious cultural issues constantly being argued today. We have a call to serve and to love and to share the gospel. We do not need a prophet to tell us what to do. We do not need a prophet to set us straight on our priorities.

John the Baptist' mission was to prepare the way for the Messiah and this new kingdom. It is here. It is among us and we know it. Even with all the political noise, we still know what we are called to be and to do. At some point Jesus will return but we do not need another prophet telling us to be ready. We work at it every day. Maybe John was the last prophet we needed. A prophet is one that communicates to us what God is saying. We can look to Jesus for that message. You are not born into the kingdom but it is born in you. You choose to nurture it. You choose to grow it. You choose eventually live it every day and as you do. Your life is transformed. It is amazing.

So on this second Sunday of Advent, we do not need to be put off by John calling us out. We listened. The Kingdom isn't coming, it is here and we are all invited to participate.