

And Don't Forget the Bugs

Year A, Second Sunday of Advent – Matthew 3:1-12

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, December 8, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

As I was digging around this week for Advent resources, I came across a children's song about John the Baptist. I don't know where it comes from, and I don't know the tune so you won't have to hear me sing it. With a nod to the Gospels' reference to John's somewhat unusual diet, the author of the song gave it the title, "Bugs for Lunch."

"Jesus said John the Baptist was great
The greatest who ever lived.
But if old John were here today
He'd tell us something like this:
If you're on the wrong road,
go the other way.
If you've got two coats,
give one away.
When Jesus Comes,
prepare the way.
And don't forget the bugs."

It sort of sums it up doesn't it? Let's see a show of hands. How many of you, if John the Baptist were your child's 3rd grade teacher – would ask for a change of classrooms? John is just a little too weird, a little too "out there," a little too over the top for a steady diet... And he seems so grumpy all the time. Warm and fuzzy he is not. Well, from all the depictions I've ever seen, I suppose you could say he *was* fuzzy, but certainly not warm. When I read the passages about John the Baptist, I come to understand why the Hebrew word for "Prophet" was the same word they generally used for "Nuts." Goodness, he wears hairy clothes and eats flying Grasshoppers! If I had been the writer of Matthew's Gospel, I probably would have conveniently lost my notes on John the Baptist. But instead, the author gives him the honor of introducing the world to Christ. Can you imagine that? That would be kind of like asking Mr. T to introduce Mother Theresa, wouldn't it?

John really does seem to us to be such a contrast to Jesus. But actually, if we really think it, we might find the contrast to be a bit overstated. John just may provide the best introduction to Jesus we can find. I mean, though Jesus didn't wear camel hair, and he apparently preferred a more *traditional* Mediterranean diet, it is a mistake of the first order to think that Jesus was all sunshine and fluff. In the time in which he lived, Jesus was scandalous. Jesus was radical. Jesus was heretical. And Jesus was downright rebellious. In the midst of complacent contentment, when we're really looking at Jesus, the words of that children's hymn might snap us back: "And don't forget the bugs."

The fact is, if Jesus were to return in the flesh, there isn't a Search Committee or Vestry or Church board anywhere that would hire him as their minister. Jesus dared to tamper with the social order. He dared to confront the powers that be. He dared to afflict the comfortable. And worst of all – Jesus dared to mess with their liturgy and to move the furniture around in the church. I'm afraid the Church Deployment Office wouldn't know what to do with Jesus' ministry portfolio. They would probably suggest that he stay out of pastoral work and stick to... oh, probably, teaching at the seminary.

I'm sometimes surprised at how easily we fall into the trap of thinking church should be a place of comfort and security. In point of fact, dear friends, with Jesus it will never be "church as usual." If it had been church as usual, those who followed him might have died peacefully in their beds. If it had been church as usual, we wouldn't be in this place this morning. Because, if it had been church as usual, Jesus would have *never* faced the cross. The fact that we've been long time, faithful and good Episcopalians,

that we bring our offerings each week, that our Sunday attendance is *fairly* regular, that we have the words of the liturgy memorized, that we are an officer of the church, or a priest in the church... does *not* mean it's siesta time. When Christmas comes, don't be fooled by that little innocent baby in a manger, because with that baby comes the eternal *Word of God*, and that Word should shake our very foundations. If you read the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and then go away feeling like you just enjoyed a cup of warm chicken soup, you might want to read further. And you might want to check out your soup – and don't forget the bugs!

Jesus came into a culture whose rules and regulations set up barriers among people. The Gospel, the good news, is that he tore *down* those barriers. Jesus ate and drank with sinners. Jesus *touched* lepers. Jesus forgave the sins of those who would otherwise be stoned for their social impurities. Jesus scolded those who held back the little children. Jesus sat at a well in the very middle of the day to debate spiritual matters, with a *woman*. Jesus spoke with the same candor *and* the same compassion to the poorest of the poor, and to the elite of the elite. That kind of radical love for *every* human being wasn't popular in Jesus' day, and let's face it, it's not all that popular today. But that kind of radical love for *every* human being *is* the Word of God!

The season of Advent calls us to re-think just how Jesus envisions this web of life he calls the Kingdom of God. Most of the time, we hear the prophet's cry and we think John says, "The kingdom of heaven is coming!" But that's not what he says here in this morning's Gospel, is it? What John *says* is, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." "Turn around," he says, "the Kingdom of God is right there!" Every day, every moment, but especially now as we await the coming of Christ anew, we are called to turn *ourselves* around. We are called to see the kingdom of heaven all around us, waiting for us to put it into action. We are called to see the glimpses of glory in *our* lives and in the lives of those around us. We are called to *his* paths straight, even in the wilderness. We are called to make the way of Jesus to be *our* way. We have chosen to follow the road of an extremist prophet, this Jesus of Nazareth, seeking to build a world in which all barriers to full humanity for every person have been removed. With the shaggy prophet of the wilderness, let's do it! Let us prepare the way of the Lord!

And don't forget the bugs!