

Supporting Roles: John – And the Prophets Among Us

Matthew 3:1-12

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In this Advent season – as we prepare ourselves for the gift of the Christmas story and the coming of Jesus – we are going to spend our four Advent Sundays taking a look at the people that God used to help prepare the way for the baby that would lie in the manger.

At the beginning of the season I want to invite you to consider this fact: God did not need to use anyone to assist in his dramatic entry into the world in the person of Jesus. All those figures we set up around our nativity sets...the wise men, the shepherds, Joseph, Mary, the sheep, the star...God didn't need to include them. If God had desired it, he could have just shown up – on his own – without our help – among us – proclaiming the good news – calling us to a new way of life – showing us what it meant to love the way that God loves.

But that is not the way God works. Our scripture shows us that – from the beginning – God chooses to collaborate with his creation to bring about his purpose.

God asked Adam and Eve to help tend the garden.

God charged Noah with building an ark.

God blessed Abraham and Sarah and made of them a people.

God gifted King David with charisma and leadership.

God used Rahab to help capture the city of Jericho.

It would have been more efficient for God work out God's purposes himself. After all, people are inconsistent – they disappoint – they sin.

But God chose to take the risk on us. And I find it absolutely fascinating – if not astounding – that God chooses to involve us in the work of bringing about the Kingdom...that God chooses to involve us in the ways that God brings about salvation.

So this Advent season we are going to do something akin to a character study of some of the people that God used in the process of entering into the fabric of our world as a babe that we wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. And, I hope, in looking at these supporting roles, we might learn how God is using the very people in our lives to bring us closer to the Christ who is...even now...alive, and working to reconcile our broken and sinful world to the vision of the world that God has in store.

Our first supporting role is that of John the Baptist. John the Baptist's story shows up in all four of the gospels. Today, I will be reading Matthew's account of John – starting in the third chapter at the first verse. Listen with me for the word of God:

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In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."'

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe 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.

'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. 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.'

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John the Baptist was a lot different than the other characters we will study this Advent – the shepherds next week, then Mary, and finally Joseph. John doesn't show up in many nativity sets. He was strange. Scary. Inconvenient. Plus, unlike the other people in the nativity we will explore who were...effectively, nobodies until Jesus was born – unlike them, John the Baptist was a big deal.

Did you know that – like Jesus – John the Baptist even had disciples...people who followed him around to listen to him preach and help spread his influence around the regions where he preached.

John had a confidence about him. He dressed like Israel's greatest prophet, Elijah, in camel's hair and leather. He berated the Pharisees and the Sadducees...two groups of people who had power and influence.

John's message was as simple as it was difficult: "repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" He was sent by God to be a forerunner for Jesus – someone who would clear the path and pave the ground so that the people would be ready to receive the Son of God.

John was a prophet.

His job was to tell the truth in a way that made people uncomfortable.

Because sometimes, that is what the truth does, does it not?

It makes us uncomfortable.

John knew that in order for the people to appreciate and experience Jesus, things had to change. People had to understand the depth of the world's brokenness. They needed to look within and identify their own broken places...and confess them...and receive God's forgiveness...and then change their behavior. John knew that when people understood the reason why the world needed saving they would be better able to respond to the Christ who saves.

John was a prophet who preached about repentance...that word, repentance, literally means "to turn around; to go a different way."

His tone was fierce and it was urgent.

No one would accuse John the Baptist of worrying about being liked by the people who heard him preach...prophets are not generally people pleasers – but it was out of John's concern for the people that he confronted them with the truth.

Note that John did not tell people the truth and urge them to repent in order that the kingdom of God might come. No, John told the truth and urged people to repent because the kingdom of God was coming.

In essence, John's message was to point to Jesus and say: "Here comes God's new world – turn around and face it!"¹

Now, you wouldn't think that this kind of message would pack the pews. Most folks prefer a sermon that makes you feel good and maybe ends with a poem. And, it turns out, John did not get invited to preach in the big steepled synagogues in Jerusalem. John did his preaching in the wilderness.

But what is so remarkable is that the people came. They streamed out of the city to come hear this wild-looking, honey-drenched man preach a message that convicted them of their sins, and called into question the ethics of their well-organized society,

¹ Bruner, Fredrick Dale, *Matthew: The Christbook* (Eerdmans, 2004) p. 87.

and challenged their religious leaders. The people came from Jerusalem and all of Judea and all the region along the Jordan – to listen to a prophet.

A prophet who said: “Here comes God’s new world – turn around and face it!”

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The world that we live in is filled with wild-looking and sounding people who yell in the wilderness. Many of them consider themselves to be prophets. Their voices come to us from the radio, or the television, or the editorial pages. Just this morning I received an email from someone who seemed pretty sure he was being prophetic – he was so eager to get his message out that he had addressed his email to as many clergy in the Charlotte area as he could find.

But just because you yell, and just because you are certain you are right, doesn’t make you a prophet. And a lot of the voices that I hear yelling in the wilderness are really simply proclaiming a message of hate, or fear, or blame.

Many of the voices that I hear yelling the wilderness seem to believe that the world can be saved if we could all just abide by a particular ideology or a particular political party.

And that is not prophesy.

It is idolatry and ego.

But I do think God uses people as prophets – and more often these people float in and out of our lives at work and school and church...and do not have their own shows on MSNBC or FoxNews.

A prophet is someone who speaks a hard truth without a personal agenda. A prophet is someone who is not afraid to confront us – but who is also concerned about us and our well-being. And, I think, a prophet is someone who challenges us and our thinking and our living – not someone who confirms the things we already think and validates the lifestyle we already live.

Personally, as a progressive-moderate with some conservative tendencies who has voted split ticket the last four elections, it’s not hard for me to find people who function as prophets. Standing in the middle requires balance and that means being open to all kinds of opinions.

One man who served the role of prophet for me was a preaching professor of mine from seminary. When I think about him, he still drives me crazy. 13 years ago I thought he was shrill and arrogant and out of touch with the real world and my opinion has not changed. But God used him to confront me with truth; a truth that continues to challenge me each day of my ministry.

Each of us in the class would preach in class a few times a semester. Sermon after sermon, he would borrow a line from Luke’s gospel and ask “how is what you just

preached good news to the poor?” There I was, hoping I had smoothed out all my transitions and that I had projected my voice well, and my professor asks, “how is what you just preached good news to the poor?”

His point was to challenge us future preachers and the congregations that we would serve with always keeping in the forefront of our minds the responsibility that the church of Jesus Christ has to stand with – and to know – the people with whom Jesus spent most of his time on this earth...the least, the lost, the left out...the poor.

My professor had never served a congregation. He had never navigated the needs of programs. He had never balanced a budget. But his words were truth. And, I pray, that God used them to help me be more faithful. Indeed one of the reasons why I am here – in this great downtown church – is because I am still interested in answering my professor’s question...and in finding out how the church of Jesus Christ might be a place where those the world ignores can find good news and welcome.

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“Here comes God’s new world – turn around and face it!”

Who, in your life, is asking you this question?

Is anyone?

Whose voice of truth cuts you to the quick and challenges you to change

The ways you think

The ways you live

The ways you believe?

Could it be – even when the words are hard to hear – that God is using the experience to help prepare you for a deeper relationship with Christ?

Will you listen?