

Advent 2 (A)  
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Text: Matthew 3:1-12

Pr Aaron J Couch  
First Immanuel Lutheran Church  
Portland, OR

A few years ago, I met someone who told me their occupation was being a performance artist. I imagine she was really good at it, because she had a really big personality, and everything with her was very dramatic. I wonder if you've ever known someone like that. I thought of her this week while reading about John the Baptist, because John just seems so much. It's not just his manner of speaking, for example, telling the people who came to hear his message they were a "brood of vipers." It's everything about John—his clothing, his diet, the way he turned his back on society to live in the desert. Everything about John the Baptist was just way too much. The thing is, I think John was intentional about being over the top. He wanted to be like the big, flashing neon sign that would get people's attention. He wanted his whole life to shout, "Danger," because nobody seemed to be noticing the danger that really was there.

What John wanted most was for the people of God to really be the people of God, for them to live God's way of justice and peace. That was what Israel was supposed to be about. God had called Abraham and Sarah into a covenant that would lead to blessing for the whole human family. God called Moses to lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt so they could be a contrast society, showing the whole world how God wanted everyone to live. On Mt Sinai, God gave Israel the Law to shape the people into a community where the strong didn't take advantage of the weak, where the vulnerable (like widows and orphans) were protected, and where everyone had enough. In that way, God's people would become a light to the whole world. They would give the world a glimpse of the peaceable kingdom, where the wolf will lie down with the lamb, and no one will hurt or destroy because everyone knows God.

Unfortunately, what John saw, what made him act like a living, breathing "Danger" sign, was that God's people were not living as a contrast society. Instead, the strong were taking advantage of the weak, the vulnerable were being exploited, and everyone was serving self-interest at every turn. It was as if Israel's covenant with God was failing. So, John offered a very memorable image to picture how close the danger was. It's like the wood cutter has already dug the dirt away from the roots of the tree and has set the ax against the roots preparing to take the first chop. John wanted his listeners to recognize that, just like that tree, danger was very close! Unfortunately, it seems that too often people of faith have heard John's warning in a punitive sort of way. I can't guess how many times I've heard Christians interpret huge disasters and personal tragedies as "God punishing the bad people." But I really don't believe God works that way. In fact, the Bible pictures God's judgment very differently. God's judgment is like this: the light of God's grace and love are shining in the world, but people keep scurrying for the shadows so they can keep making the same old stupid choices, so God leaves us to experience the painful consequences of those choices.

Even though John's message was for the people of Israel 2000 years ago, the thing I find most unsettling about it is how pointedly it speaks to the Christian Church. The church is supposed to be the community that shows the world what the love of God looks like, what Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness looks like. But instead, the loudest voices that claim the label "Christian" are angry and judgmental, anti-

gay or anti-immigrant. There are Prosperity Gospel teachers whose message appeals to human greed. Christian Nationalists are all about power and domination. It's difficult to even hear the voices that speak for compassion and forgiveness. I think John would tell us—we're in a dangerous situation. It isn't that God will come to punish us. Instead, the danger is that we're destroying our own communities with poverty and inequality, with racism and political extremism. We're even destroying our world by carelessly consuming more-more-more. But too many people just aren't paying attention. As a society, we're making greedy, fearful, short-sighted choices. And that's dangerous.

Fortunately, there's more to John the Baptist's message than just a warning of "Danger." John also believed that when we're aware of the danger, there's also an opportunity. We have an opportunity to change our minds and change our behaviors, to make different choices. The biblical word for that is "repentance." It means to turn around, to change our course in life. John wanted God's people to change their minds about the sort of life they wanted in order to embrace the covenant vision for being a contrast society, where people treat each other with hospitality instead of fear, where the vulnerable are protected, where there is equality rather than exploitation. And John was so urgent in his appeal because he felt himself to be at an inflection point in history. John saw himself as a transitional figure. John was preparing the way for something wondrous. God would be sending someone great, someone through whom the Holy Spirit would enliven and renew and purify God's people, someone who would lead God's people into their destiny to be a light to the world.

In the verses immediately after our gospel reading for today, Matthew shows us Jesus as the One for whom John was preparing the way. Jesus is the One who models a covenant vision that recognizes every person as a child of God. Jesus is the One who invites us to experience the love of God as we follow his way of compassion, forgiveness, generosity and humility. Jesus is the One who gathers around himself a community that is rooted in love and has room for everyone. Jesus is the One who rejects violence or retaliation and instead invites us to be reconciled to God and to each other. In other words, Jesus is that inflection point in history John was looking for. Jesus embodies God's grace and mercy, God's expansive generosity and love, and Jesus invites us to follow him into life with God. Jesus is the human family's opportunity—to choose life instead of death, to choose wholeness and peace instead of conflict and estrangement—by following Christ's way of love for God and love for neighbor.

John saw himself as preparing the way. With his harsh words about danger and his wake up call and summons to repentance, John was inviting his listeners to make their lives ready for God to bring peace, to bring healing and wholeness, to bring joy and life and blessing. And this morning John's message calls to us, inviting us to prepare the way in our hearts for Jesus' vision for the human family made whole to challenge and change our values and priorities. John's message is all about making the path straight for us, so that we can follow Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness, his way of generosity and humility and inclusive community. It is by diving deep into Jesus and letting his wisdom guide us that the opportunity John points us to becomes our lived experience—becomes joy and life and blessing. Thanks be to God. Amen.