

Sacred People

Matthew 3:1-6, 11-12

December 4, 2022 Second Sunday of Advent *Reflecting the Sacred series*

Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael, CA

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 Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.

... "I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and 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."

Matthew 3: 1-12 (NRSVUE)

Advent in the church is a season of sacred stories and writings about sacred people. You might think Advent and Christmas are only about the all-star cast of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the wisemen and of course the Christ child away in a manger. And yet, every year as pastors and congregations reflect on the readings in lectionary cycle, the readings always include prophets – truth tellers, people called by God to challenge people to change, to speak and act in ways that reflect the divine covenant of justice, peace and compassion. Prophets spoke to those in power and to ordinary people – the Holy One who created you is calling you to repent, to turn around, to be the people you were created to be and to live in community – Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. Remember who are.

Some of the readings in Advent are from the prophet Isaiah. Many of these are woven in to Handel's *Messiah*. And there are readings from the gospels about John the Baptist. Prophets were Sacred People. The Spirit was in them and flowed through them in powerful words.

John is a major figure in our Advent Adventures. As Bruce Epperly puts it, John presents us with the dream of a new era, but it is clear that to get there we must go through a dark night of the soul. (1) We must prune away what hinders us. The realm of God requires a change of heart, a contrite spirit, and a new set of values. God is graceful and initiates this process of creative transformation, but God needs us for God's dream to be realized in the world. John's calling to us requires profound personal and social transformation. John challenges us to create a world in which repentance is possible, and this requires us to turn from the ways of

death to life for us and all creation. This sacred person prophet offers a challenging teaching with a jolt in the midst of our Christmas carols and glowing candles.

Little is known about the relationship of Jesus and John the Baptist. According to tradition, when Mary the mother of Jesus meets her close relative Elizabeth, John leaps in utero in acknowledgment of the uniqueness of Mary's son. Beyond that, the early life of John, later John the Baptist, like Jesus' early life, is shrouded in mystery until adulthood.

As an adult, John comes on the scene as a wild man, dressed like in camel hair shirt and eats locusts, proclaiming hard words of transformation and redemption. He comes as a purveyor of bad news first: he doesn't mince words to the folk who come out to hear him preach, some knowing they need transformation, others for the sheer spectacle of it all.

"You brood of vipers," he shouts, insulting the erudite and affluent. A voice crying in the wilderness, John is a prophet in the tradition of Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah. Transformation requires pruning, and destruction of old ways of life. He proclaims - Your souls need purification: put off injustice and idolatry and spiritual smugness to experience God's realm in the now. Those who sought new life received baptism as a sign of purification and commitment. But, the cleansing waters of baptism must be preceded by a change of heart and lifestyle. John's word convicted his listeners and convicts us today. We must choose life, John says, economically, politically, relationally, and congregationally.

"Align yourself with God's coming realm," such was the message of John. God will come, the gospel narratives state, manifest in the message, hospitality, inclusive, and healing practices of Jesus of Nazareth. John anticipates Jesus' ministry not as an abstract otherworldly figure but as a spiritual companion, first of John himself, and then all of us.

The Celtic Christians use the term *anamcara* to describe a deep spiritual relationship of common values and commitments. Our *anamcara* mirrors our deepest self and enables us to embody the glory of God as persons "fully alive." In relationship to our soul companion, or *anamcara*, we experience the better angels of ourselves and others.

Imagine the relationship of John and Jesus for a moment. I believe they were *anamcara*, the best of friends, cousins, spiritual friends. The narrative evidence suggests that Mary and Elizabeth were soul sisters, spiritual friends, *anamcara*. Elizabeth was the first relative to hear of Mary's unusual pregnancy.

We can wonder about the historicity of these stories. These are the storied truths about Mary, Elizabeth, Jesus and John, sacred people with sacred stories. These are stories that tell us the deeper meaning of life, and invite us to journey beyond the ordinary and controllable world to God's unexpected and surprising realm of spiritual transformation.

It is no surprise for John when Jesus comes to the Jordan River to be baptized. John protests: he felt unworthy. He recognizes Jesus' full humanity – the glory of God, indeed the Incarnation, is a person fully alive – resonated with divine energy, power, and wisdom. John may have recognized that what he spoke about in his sermons Jesus' fully experienced.

John is Advent personified: he embodies the fierce urgency of the now, but not yet. He is impatient with our willingness to ignore our own belovedness, our own sacredness.

So the sacred people of Advent are John and Jesus, Mary and Elizabeth, Joseph... and us. In his book *The Universal Christ*, Richard Rohr weaves this theme throughout. "You must come to know the Word becoming flesh in the very cells of your body—and see it in the cells of all bodies, which each carry the same divine DNA of their Creator." (3) If we have thought too little of ourselves and we do not see the Divine in us. Or we thought too much of ourselves and our ego gets in the way of being fully aware of God's grace, then we are missing out on the gifts of Advent and Christmas.

We are sacred people and all people are sacred. Rohr writes that one sign of growth and maturity on our spiritual journeys is that we proceed "with every-greater circles of inclusion" (pg. 31). One day, you come to the point where you realize, "You are not your gender, your nationality, your ethnicity, your skin color or your social class.... You are a child of God and always will be, even when you don't believe it." (pages 36-37).

We are sacred and beloved people beyond labels and categories. Our words and actions may not always reflect that, but that is the path of transformation. We are invited to be a community where we have Anam Caras – spiritual friends who keep reminding us of who we are, even when we don't believe. To be the people God made us to be and continue to deepen our spiritual lives and connections in community, Brene Brown talks about facing areas of vulnerability, fear and even shame in our lives. She writes, "Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing we will ever do." (3)

Sacred people can change their perceptions about themselves and each other in the light of the Christmas story. Close with selections from one of my favorite Christmas stories. *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* by Barbara Robinson.

The Herdmans are absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world. They lie, cheat, smoke cigars, hit little kids and are all around awful. They lived in a very tiny house and often barely had enough food. One Sunday they went to church before Christmas. They had never heard the Christmas story before. By some mistake or miracle, they were given parts in the Christmas pageant. On Christmas Eve, when the pageant was performed, with Imogene Herdman as the Angel Gabriel, there were many surprises.

I was standing near the manger with the baby doll baby Jesus when we were all singing Silent Night, including the audience. We sang all the verses, and when we got to Son of God, Love's pure light, I looked over at Imogene and I almost dropped my hymnbook on a baby angel. Everyone had been waiting all this time for the Herdmans to do something absolutely unexpected. And sure enough, that was what happened. Imogene Herdman was crying. In the candlelight her face was all shiny with tears and she didn't even bother to wipe them away. She just sat there – awful old Imogene – in her crooked veil, was crying and crying. Later someone noticed it looked like she had a black eye. She had walked into the corner of the choir robe cabinet in a kind of a daze – as if she had just caught onto the idea and love of God and the wonder of Christmas.... And because of the Herdmans, I finally understood Christmas for the first time too.... Christmas came over Imogene all at once, like a case of chills and fever. And so she was crying and walking into furniture. As far as I am concerned, Mary will not look all pure and dressed in a special blue robe – but like Imogene Herdman, sort of nervous and bewildered. And the Angel Gabriel will always look like Gladys Herdman, with her skinny legs and dirty sneakers, yelling at all of us, “Hey! Unto you a child is born!” (4)

The Herdmans, in a church Christmas pageant, discovered that they too were beloved and sacred and part of the Christmas story.

We are sacred people. Wake up, turn around and hear that is good news. Amen.

1) Bruce Epperly, *The Adventurous Lectionary –The Second Sunday in Advent – December 4, 2022*
<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2022/11/the-adventurous-lectionary-the-second-sunday-in-advent-december-4-2022/>

2) Quoted in *Everything is Sacred: 40 Practices and Reflections on The Universal Christ*, by Richard Rohr and Patrick Boland. (Convergent Books, 2021), pg. xiii

3) pg. 48

4) Barbara Robinson, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, (Harper Collins, 1972), pgs. 77-80 excerpts