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Year A, 2 Advent – Matthew 3:1-12  
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I have noticed recently that the word “authentic” has become quite popular. We are encouraged to find our most “authentic” selves. Cuisine is evaluated on the basis of how “authentic” it is to the region it represents. We speak of authentic people and replicas and places, and we eschew things that are deemed “inauthentic.” Perhaps it is because “authentic” has become a buzzword in our culture that I was struck this week by the sheer authenticity of John the Baptist.

We hear about John the Baptist each year on the second Sunday of Advent. This year, our account comes from Matthew who takes pains to paint a clear picture of the prophet. He tells us that John “wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist.” He ate locusts and wild honey, and you can almost hear him crunching on those little bugs as he walked around yelling about repentance. Matthew does not say anything about John’s general hygiene, but I feel certain that his hair was matted and that an odor trailed behind him wherever he went. Matthew’s description illustrates that this prophet was quite a character; he was authentic in appearance and general being – not one to bend to social or cultural or religious norms.

He also was authentic in his words. With John the Baptist, there is no sugar-coating. There is no passive aggressive Southern charm or attempt at gentle words. His message is hard-hitting: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*” he begins. When he sees the Pharisees and the Sadducees coming, he calls them out, questioning their authenticity in their desire to be baptized. “*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance... every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire,*” he says.

These words don’t exactly inspire holiday cheer. They paint an image of a judgmental and even wrathful God. But it is important to consider what they mean for us during this holy season of preparation. What does John the Baptist mean in his call to repent? Does it mean feeling regret for one’s mistakes? Is it about trying to be a better person? How does repentance fit into the grace and forgiveness that we know through Jesus Christ? Will there really be some sort of judgement day when God will, as John says, separate the wheat from the chaff or the good from the bad?

These questions focus on repentance as a response to some sort of standards of moral worthiness. But the kind of repentance that John the Baptist is talking about is something deeper. Rather than self-purification, this repentance is focused on God’s desire to realign us with the life of Christ. It is like a spiritual tune-up or recalibration of sorts. Theologian John Burgess says, “*Repentance is not so much about our guilt feelings as about God’s power to transform us into Christ’s image. For Matthew, John’s strange clothes and harsh sayings are necessary aspects of communicating the full meaning of the gospel.*”

Read in this light, John the Baptist's words about cutting down the trees that do not bear good fruit become about preparation and transformation; about clearing out the old - the clutter of our spiritual lives that are not life-giving - to make room for the new that comes through the birth of Jesus Christ. This kind of transformation is what John was talking about when he speaks of God raising up stones.

We may prefer the warm and fuzzy aspects of the story of Christ's birth, but too often, the reality of what God has done for us is lost. It is sanitized in the trappings and commercialism and holly, jolly parts of Christmas. We need John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness – in all of his crazy authenticity - to help us to see the magnitude of what happens in the incarnation. The prophet reminds us that Christ's coming fundamentally changes the world. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the renowned pastor and theologian said, *“We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking on the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for anyone who has a conscience.”*

So this morning, we listen John the Baptist, in all of his eccentricity. But we miss the point if we hear his message as only pointing toward a wrathful or judgmental God. And we miss the point if we hear it as a call just to fix our short-comings or to undergo some sort of self-purification. Instead, his hard-hitting words point us to the magnitude of what God does in coming to this earth. He reminds us that God's judgment is inextricably connected to God's promises. In the birth of Jesus Christ, we know a new heaven and a new earth. In his death and resurrection, we know God's unconditional love and grace and forgiveness that conquers sin and death. May we heed the call of this crazy, locust-eating, oddly-dressed, probably stinky, truth-telling authentic prophet. And may we prepare ourselves for this radical, earth-shattering, life-saving good news. Amen.