

## **A Shoot from a Stump on Second Advent**

**By Patty Friesen (Dec 10/17)**

Isaiah 11:1-10, Matthew 3:1-12

John the Baptist is such a grouch. We've just sung beautiful hymns and lit the peaceful Advent candles and John the Baptist comes along calling people names and threatening them with axes and winnowing forks and unquenchable fire. Talk about the Grinch that stole Advent! "In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the desert." John's clothes were made of camel's hair and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey." I guess we'd be grouchy too if we had to preach in the hot desert to a skeptical audience, wearing a ridiculous camel hide outfit and eating bugs.

But even if his camel hair itched and the locusts gave him digestive issues, we learned in preaching class, you have to engage your listeners with a little humour and a personal anecdote not with calling them names and telling them they are going to hell. "Look around," John declares, seems we've got some bad trees around here not bearing good fruit. Every one of them is going to be cut down and thrown into the fire." This is how John proclaimed the good news? Nobody wants to hear about hell just before Christmas. No wonder Herod's stepdaughter asked for his head on a plate. It was the only way to shut him up!

But John's listeners were comforted by his words of a winnowing Saviour. There are a couple of things about John that remind the people of Israel about their history. The first is that John is dressed like the prophet Elijah who also wore camel hair. The second is that he is preaching in the desert. The desert reminds Israel that they wandered there for forty years and God took care of them. They remember that from the roots of their

beginning and their dependence of God in the desert comes another prophet in the tradition of Elijah – someone to call them back to God.

John is the voice calling, “In the desert prepare the way of the Lord,” and surprisingly, some people actually came out to the desert to hear his crazy message. These are people looking for salvation and who are not finding it in the religious centers in the cities, in the Temple in Jerusalem or in the local synagogues. These are the spiritually marginalized who do not attend the traditional religious centers of worship in the beautiful cities where the fruit trees grow but who trek out to a wild treeless place to hear a tumbleweed. It is an odd place for the way of the Lord to begin but sometimes God uses odd ways to get our attention. In John’s crazy message, they were drawn toward God. They didn’t hear exclusion or perfection or judgment but they heard acceptance and hope and in that dry and desolate place, they quenched their physical and spiritual thirst in the Jordan River.

John doesn’t really get mad until the religious leaders show up to find out where their flocks have gone. Then he cuts loose with the brood of vipers speech. It wasn’t a very nice thing to say to your colleagues but a guy who wears camel hair isn’t going to worry about being nice. He tells the religious leaders to produce the fruit of humility and repentance because the axe is already at the root of their trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Cutting down trees is a harsh threat in a Middle Eastern context where they love and diligently tend their fruit and olive trees. Cutting down an olive tree that takes 25 years to produce fruit is an abomination. Farmers wait a long time for their trees to produce fruit in the Middle East and do not prematurely cut anything unless it is clear for

many harvests that the tree is not producing. Then it is good stewardship in an orchard to cut non-producers to make space for new saplings that need a chance to produce.

As a vegetable gardener, I have learned quite a bit about thinning out vegetables. In our first garden at seminary, Patrick and I couldn't bear to pull up any carrots so they couldn't grow at all. Now we have learned the practicality of making space for growing things. So when John the Baptist speaks of axes and winnowing forks, he is not talking about the indiscriminate violence of God who madly chops away at everything and everyone in sight but a patient gardener and farmer who selectively trims and prunes to make space for new saplings.

Isaiah assures us that even chopped trees and seemingly dead stumps produce shoots, and new life springs up from roots into branches that will bear fruit. New trees do not just start from nothing but from roots and stumps and acorns of other trees. John is not preaching a new religion based on his own ideas. He places himself firmly within the tradition and history of Israel by identifying with Elijah and with the wandering desert years. He promises new life out of an ancient history. Shoots from stumps and baptisms in deserts, new life arises out of desolation.

John's hellfire was good news to the crowds who had put up with the bad guys for so long – the Romans, the Herods, the oppression. The fire was being prepared for those bad apples and that was good news. Perhaps tyrants and evildoers ought to go to bed every night thinking that there might just be a hell. But what the New Testament proclaims as reality is not hell. It proclaims that our real life is in Jesus Christ so that what became of him will become of us. For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive

in Christ. It proclaims that God so loved the world and that the Lord is not wishing that any should perish. Nowhere does the gospel proclaim the kingdom of hell is at hand.

The church is commissioned not to proclaim the advent of hell to all who are on their own mad way there but rather the advent of Jesus Christ. He has come, as John promised. Alone and abandoned, scripture says, he entered the depths of hell so there is absolutely no possibility for us that even hell is beyond the reach of God's inexhaustible grace. Like a Middle Eastern farmer, God is not into chopping trees but waits patiently for years for fruit and then if a tree comes down, God can still be seen bending over the stump looking for shoots. The end and the fullness of all things is known only to God. But we catch glimpses of shoots and new life in the midst of life's disasters and disappointments.

May God be near to us this Advent season and give us comfort and hope in whatever our situation. And in the world, may justice guard this child of hope and may peace abound below. Amen.

Sing "To Us a Child of Hope" #192 HWB