

Re-enchanting John (the Baptizer)*Matthew 3:1-12
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*In those days John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent" (which is to say, change your hearts and minds) "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 our God, make straight the paths of God.' 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...." (Matthew 3:1-12)*

I have to begin by confessing, that when Pastor Gusti and I were dreaming up this year's Advent theme of "re-enchantment," I was clearly more focused on my Thanksgiving getaway to Puerto Rico—the "island of enchantment" -- than I was this peculiar story from the second Sunday in Advent. John has never struck me as *remotely* enchanting. Maybe I've just heard too many sermons about this dirty, angry, scary desert wild man. Frankly, its always puzzled me why *this* finger shaking dude is brought in to help set up the whole story of incarnation.

But you know, none of those descriptors are actually present in the text. Its true, John has retreated to the desert. This is a time-honored practice of faithful seekers of all times and traditions, especially in response to oppression, violence and religious perversion. But the crowds follow him there, people from all over the region, drawn by John's voice, attracted to his call, enchanted (perhaps!) by his promise: "Prepare! Reform! The kingdom of heaven *has* come near." Or, we might say, prepare the way of love, seek and allow the transformation of our hearts, our minds, our lives, our world. God is here."

John's invitation attracts all kinds of people, including Jesus, who shows up in the scene that follows this one, where Jesus begins his whole ministry by *receiving* John's blessing and with it, this whole new identity as God's beloved.

Its also true, John does get angry, but not so much with the crowds. Here, anyway, he is condemning the religious and political authorities who have shown up, calling them a bunch of snakes (a refrain that Jesus will repeat later in this Gospel.) Imagine John's followers hearing that! As people of privilege, maybe it's not such a bad thing that John makes us a tad bit uncomfortable. But when we make him a caricature we silence his voice, the Voice of Wisdom which so often shows up in the most unexpected people and places.

That voice is not always all that polite. Wisdom demands liberation for all of creation, and relentlessly exposes the ways that we fall short of her vision. She speaks to us through prophets, and prophets are always pretty weird. In our tradition, remember, prophets are not fortune tellers, they are truth-tellers. And, they are people motivated, according to the Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, by their *felt experience* of Divine

passion, sharing some measure of God's very own suffering and sorrow and joy—how could they not be at least a little weird.

Sometimes the prophet wears camel's hair and leather, like John, and like Elijah before him, and sometimes they just might show up in sneakers and a cardigan, hand made by mom. And you know what? I never much liked Fred Rogers either, I'm sorry to say. If John seems too severe, Mr. Rogers always seemed way too nice. How very many ways there are to silence the Voice of Wisdom!

Niceness and kindness, it turns out, are two very different things. Niceness sustains the status quo, kindness very often upends it. If you really want to be a rebel, says Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg, practice kindness. Fred Rogers exuded it, the kindness that grows out of a deeply lived compassion. He understood with extraordinary clarity that compassion is a capacity given to each and every human being, to be received and cultivated, or refused. He chose compassion, and he lived its wisdom. Both helped shape his uncanny vision for amplifying goodness, using this brand new medium—television--that he openly despised.

It is entirely fitting, by the way, that Fred Rogers was a deeply rooted Presbyterian, this being a tradition dedicated to transforming the world through active engagement in it, rather than separation from it. I love the advent blankness of our archway space; in part because it reminds me that prior to all our building additions, and long before that cross turned up one Lenten season, our ancestors (good Scottish Presbyterians) designed a building with a window behind the pulpit. Not stained glass but clear glass. An opening onto the world, God's theater, in the words of John Calvin, where the divine is always present and acting, where the voice of wisdom can always be heard.

It was through the incredible foresight of the Presbytery of Pittsburg that Rogers was ordained as a Presbyterian pastor way back in 1963. He received the unheard of charge to do ministry with children and their families through mass media. He never had a traditional church, rarely talked publicly about God or faith, but his ministry in the wilderness of television reached millions, and transformed countless lives.

Roger's faith, and his work, were deeply grounded in God and goodness—also so Presbyterian. Calvin, despite his severe reputation, often referred to God as simply "fountain of Goodness." Rogers once wrote that "God's nature (goodness) has grown and grown and grown all through the ages." As the 20th century was coming to a close, he declared "the real job that we have" is to "make goodness attractive in the ... next millennium." That, my friends, would be now.

There is such a hunger for goodness these days, reflected in the popularity of the Fred Rogers story. Its being told in both documentary form, and now this new bio pic with Tom Hanks. If you have not read the 1998 Esquire article on which the film is based, go home today and read it. And then read at least a few of the many follow up articles written by the same author, Tom Junot. It is a stunningly beautiful parable about the power of goodness to transform broken lives.

Like all good prophets Rogers was not perfect. He was creative and compassionate and extremely peculiar. He was plagued by very human self doubts and anxieties and he had some pretty big blind spots. He was driven, demanding and perfectionist. But most of all, says writer Jennifer Armstrong, this prophet in a cardigan was “a firebrand with a cause determined to give children the respect they deserved, determined to spread love as an antidote to hate and division, and determined to use the medium of television to change the world.”

Rogers was creative, and so generous in sharing his many gifts, but most extraordinary was his capacity to receive. He lived out this conviction that authentic receiving is as important if not moreso than the capacity to give. He wrote, “I see that people who are not the fancy people in this world, are the ones who seem to nourish my soul and I want to learn how to be the best receiver I can ever be. Because I think graceful receiving is one of the most wonderful gifts we can give anybody.”

This attitude of active receptivity is essential to the transformation that John is calling us to. To *prepare the way*, we must make room for the new thing that God is birthing, in us and among us, and to practice noticing and letting go of all the things that stand in the way. We need practices that can help us learn to listen deeply, and to receive. Maybe the most important work of Advent, of spiritual life, is the work of cultivating this capacity to receive gracefully--from others, from life, from God.

To receive the voice of wisdom wherever she turns up. And you know what? that can be just about anywhere. In the Old Testament, wisdom runs through the public square and calls out in the streets. Often she sings; in Exodus, Miriam’s powerful song of resistance, in Mary a lullaby of liberation. In John, wisdom calls out for our attention, and pleads with us to prepare Love’s way.

And by the way, on the “island of enchantment,” the voice of wisdom is especially strong: we heard it in the quiet groundedness of the famous artist explaining in his halting English how his trippy, cubist images of palm trees were his way of showing the layers and layers of reality that he experiences shimmering all around him, all the time; in the exuberance of the surf instructor so melancholy about his own squandered gifts, who bursts to life as he shares his love of surfing; levitating with enthusiasm as his class of beginners, fall and fall and fall again until suddenly, listening intently to his words, they find their feet and ride the wave; and in the quiet humility of the renowned chef who lost everything in the hurricane, and is just beginning again in a tiny storefront with 3 tabletops. After we expressed our appreciation for the amazing meal he had prepared, he told us: “I’d rather have a night like this than a 40 plate evening in the city. When you receive my art, my gift to you, that is the greatest gift to me. And life,” he concluded, “is the greatest art our Creator gives to us.” Its ours to learn to receive that gracefully.

And of course, the voice of wisdom can even be heard on TV; it was there that Fred Rogers showed us the power of cultivated kindness. He once wrote “at the heart of the original creation is that Word (call it Love, call it Grace, call it Peace ...) that essence which is lodged somewhere within each of us that longs for ultimate expression. If we choose to allow it to grow we’ll be given help. If we choose otherwise we won’t be

forced. If there is such a thing as a “dark corner” of God’s nature then I think it’s God’s refusal to go back on the promise of “the creation’s freedom to love or not.”

May we freely choose love.

Amen