

A pregnant woman gets in a car accident and falls into a deep coma. Asleep for nearly 6 months, when she wakes up, she sees that she is no longer pregnant and frantically asks the doctor about her baby. The doctor replies, "Ma'am, you had twins! A boy and a girl. Your brother came in and named them. The woman says, "No, not my brother – he's an idiot!" She asks the doctor, "Well, what's the girl's name?" "Denise." "Wow, that's not a bad name, in fact, I like it! What's the boy's name?" "Denephew."

OK, just 2 little notes on the background of the gospel. John the Baptist obviously did not worry about getting letters from his listeners about being offended by what he said. He was not worried about how it might affect the collection! He is straight up and takes dead aim. When he calls them a 'brood of vipers,' it's a very offensive term. People in antiquity thought that vipers were born by hatching inside their mother, then gnawing their way through their mother's wombs – killing their mothers in the process. So calling people a brood of vipers was the same as calling them 'mother-murderers' – one of the most reprehensible offenses conceivable. (from CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS BIBLE, p. 1628, note 3.7) Which just shows me to be the downright pussycat supreme that I am, all sweet-talk and southern charm! Why, I would rather step on my lips than call you all mother-murderers!

But John serves His Lord, Jesus, with utmost devotion and deference. He invokes another image that would have been familiar to his listeners. In the first century world of master-teachers, revered rabbis and their schools of loyal students and disciples, a seriously devoted student would literally dog his teacher's steps, following him wherever he went. Every aspect of a great rabbi's life was worthy of observation and emulation by a truly dedicated student. But a well-known rabbinical saying drew a distinct line in the sand between the actions expected of a zealous disciple and the labors accorded to a common body slave. This saying proscribed that 'every work which a slave performs for his lord, a disciple must do for his teacher, except loosening his sandal.' John, of course, promptly capitalizes on that very distinction. In fact, in Matthew's text, he not only declares himself unworthy to perform that slave-like function of loosening his Master's sandal, but also finds himself too unworthy even to 'carry his sandals.' (from HOMILETICS ONLINE, 4 December 2022) Why were sandals and feet so offensive? Because of all the animals that walked where the people walked, and no one carried doggie bags to clean any of it up! And of course, this is exactly what Jesus did at the Last Supper – He got down and washed the disciples' feet, after first removing their sandals.

Second, John's message is simple and direct: REPENT. Now unbelievers often say that religion is a crutch. And they are right. It is. What they don't realize is that we are ALL cripples. That's what John the Baptist, like all God's prophets, tell us. John's an alarm clock to wake us up from our dreamy, comfortable sleep and the dream that all is well. John is the x-ray that tells us we need open heart surgery. "Free heart surgery" is not good news to those who think their heart is perfectly fine. It is great news to those who know they need a new heart, a heart full of unselfish love and trust instead of selfishness and fear.

We all have a John the Baptist inside us. It's called conscience. It speaks like John. It's hard as nails. It's light. It's truth. It destroys our comfortable illusions about ourselves, especially the deadly lie that almost every voice in our modern culture tells us – that we are all 'good people,' and we are fine just like we are. We have largely swallowed the lie that we are not like the Pharisee because we do not judge, as he does, we do not say, "Thank you, Lord, that I am not like other men" (see Lk 18:11). But that is exactly our Phariseism, our lie, our hypocrisy: we say, "Thank you, Lord, that I am not like this Pharisee. I am not judgmental, like those horrible old traditional guilt-ridden Irish Catholics or Muslims or Orthodox Jews, or Protestant Evangelicals or Pentecostals. I am enlightened and tolerant and progressive. I am not like other men. I am humble." We are proud of our humility, and that is the most dangerous trap of all.

John the Baptist, like all the prophets, convicts us of sin, whether it's our sins against hospitality for immigrants or sins against the unborn, whether it's sins against global financial and environmental responsibility or sins against sexual morality; whether it's sins against the poor or sins against the rich; and whether it's sins against the body or sins against the soul. That's why John uses such shocking language – he's trying to get our attention. (adapted from Peter Kreeft, *FOOD FOR THE SOUL*, p. 27-28) But we don't want to hear this – or deal with it —let's just go shopping.

Third, the way forward. Robert McAfee Brown, who was a pastor and religion professor at Stanford University, included this comment on an old family photo taken at Christmas time. He writes, "There we all are gathered around the creche on Christmas Eve, putting the animals and the wise men and the shepherds around the baby, who is a small center of sanity in a large and crazy world." Which is a great description of what Advent is supposed to be for us – a small center of sanity in a large and crazy world. Advent reminds us annually that life is NOT all about us – but rather it is all about GOD.

I read about a young woman named Elizabeth who had spent many years struggling with a drug addiction. During those years she was desperate for some words of encouragement, some signs of hope. When she got into recovery and got a new life, she wanted to help others who were trapped by hopelessness. So she started writing notes of encouragement and sticking them on the windshields of cars around her city or posting them on telephone poles in local parks. She ended one note with the words, "Much love. Hope sent."

Much love. Hope sent. That's what we celebrate in this season – that Jesus embodied the message of much love, hope sent. We see that in the sweepingly beautiful imagery from Isaiah, but also in the challenging sermon of John – only 9 words long! "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." I'm sure you would love it if my homilies were that short! But you're paying me such big bucks I want to give you your money's worth, your full homiletical torture!

Rabbi Ari Lamm says that in the Jewish tradition, repentance is an example of time travel. We're not talking science fiction here. He says that the Bible shows us that true repentance changes both our future and our past. Think about this! Repentance changes both our future and our past!

Lamm says "If you repent properly, what God promises is that He will change who we are. It's a question of identity." And I want to paraphrase his main point here. He says that in Judaism, "What God promises to those who sincerely repent is the opportunity to say, "I am no longer that person who sinned....I am a fundamentally different person. It's as if I am a newborn child, and I have a new path in life."

That's the promise and the hope of Advent-Christmas. At Christmas, the kingdom of heaven came near in the person of Jesus Christ. And through Jesus, we have a new King, a new life, and a new purpose all promised to us when we receive the kingdom of heaven.

But all of this has to be lived out. In service, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, kindness, and love – always love. St. John Chrysostom was the bishop of Constantinople in the 5th century. He taught his congregation that the biggest way to share their faith was through their actions. He wrote, "Let us astound them by our way of life. This is the unanswerable argument. Though we give 10,000 precepts in words, if we bore them with 3 point homilies every Sunday (WHO SAID THAT?!) if we do not exhibit a far better life, we gain nothing. It is not what is said that draws their attention, but what we do. Let us win them therefore by our life."

"Let us astound them by our way of life." Let's show the world what it looks like for Christ to live through our actions, our words and our priorities. Let us show the world by our actions what it means to go

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from death to new life. Which says to all: Much love. Hope sent. Let the Church say Amen. (third point adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, 4 December 2022, p. 62-65)

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