

Would We Have Listened to John the Batpist?

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+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of  
the Holy Ghost. Amen.

It is probably not a surprise to those of you who know me, but it bears clarification in light of this morning's Gospel. There is not a counter-cultural bone in my body. I love structure and a clear delineation of authority and all the rules of society which my parents' generation scorned. I'm not saying my disposition is better, just that it is what it is.

That said, John the Baptist is a rather uncomfortable character for me. John's message and the very fact that it was him preaching it would have been incredibly subversive. God's message was not coming through the expected channels, through the institutions set up to be the agents of God (in the case of the high priests) or through those in

positions of temporal power, such as the Emperor or the Governor. Rather, the message of God, the call to repentance, was coming from this strange figure, this apparent madman, John, to whom few of us, if we were honest with ourselves, would have probably listened. I know (to my own discredit) I probably wouldn't have.

Now, John the Baptist was subversive in a manner wholly different from the culturally appropriate subversion which we've come to appreciate after the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and which we've come to label "counterculture". With apologies to those of you who grew up in the sixties or who are drawn to the current "Occupy" movements, John the Baptist was not the personification of some Ancient Judean zeitgeist. He was not countercultural in the same way a hippy might have been or a contemporary protestor might be. He was not even anti-establishment in the same way that the anti-Roman

zealots of his own day were. He was much weirder even than that.

In this morning's Gospel we read "Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey." This was almost as strange a way to dress and eat in those days as it would be now. What's more, John didn't go to the temple or to one of the gates of Jerusalem to preach his message where it might be heard by those with some political or economic power. He remained in the desert.

This would have been reckoned very strange by the people of the first century, even the counter-cultural people of the time, who would have been used to self-proclaimed prophets, but of a more socially acceptable variety. This John character was not like them, but those with any sense of history would have recognized that he fit the bill, as it were, a great deal more closely than these other so-called prophets.

It had been more than four-hundred years since a legitimate, canonical prophet had preached in Israel, but if one were to look back at those Old Testament prophets, one would notice the similarities between them and John. John's message was not self-promoting, as were the sermons of first-century pseudo-prophets, who claimed a messianic identity for themselves. Rather, John, like the legitimate prophets of the Old Testament, pointed away from himself and always to another, namely Jesus, as the longed-for Messiah. Like so many of the Old Testament prophets, chiefly Amos (whom we've been reading in Morning prayer this week), John arose from obscurity to take on the prophetic vocation. And his message, the message of repentance and of preparation for the day of the Lord, mirrored that of the legitimate prophets, particularly Elijah, the prophet with whom John was most readily identified.

We don't get the full John the Baptist story this morning, but what can we learn from the little introduction to John which is this week's Gospel? It seems to me that the most important lesson we get is that the Word of God comes to us from sources we might least expect. Certainly, we should be attentive to the normal modes in which we've come to experience that Word. We should be attentive to the Scriptures and to the teachings of Church Fathers and Councils and even to the minor insights I struggle to provide every week. But sometimes, and maybe more than just sometimes if we're paying attention, the grace and love of God is made even more apparent, presents itself even more tangibly, in unexpected ways from the people we least expect.

I've had the Word of God preached to me more compellingly by people who come in and out of my office looking for help than I do from slick preachers. I've seen more trust in the power of God

in the hearts of uneducated peasants in Christian slums in South Asia than I have in my own heart. I've seen more love and hope in the lives of apparently unlovely people in apparently hopeless situations than I have from those who, like me, are in the business of loving people and instilling hope. I've even heard more fulsome expositions of Christian truth from the mouths of children than from many academic theologians.

And these are all prophets of a sort, modern John the Baptists who have surprised me with their insights and have given me a new perspective on that old, old story. I suspect that many of you have had similar experiences, the Word of God being made real in ways and from people you least expected.

So, keep watch. Open your eyes. Look for these modern prophets. We hear over and over again, and especially in Advent, to be watchful. Last week's sermon was all about watching and waiting for the

Kingdom of God. Let us be watchful, though, not only for Christ at his return, but for the risen Christ in our midst, right now, being made present in ways and through people we do not expect. Pray that God may give you the eyes to see his messengers for what they are, and ask Him to give you faith in the message they preach, and that John the Baptist preached, and that each of us should be preaching: namely that great message of hope in our Lord's return.

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Amen.