Sermon for Advent II
St. John's Tappahannock
Rev. Nanette Woodworth
Matthew 3:1-12

Today I would like to talk about the life of John the Baptist, and about the importance of his message of repentance as a threshold to cross before we greet the life changing baby Jesus, once again.

The Jerome commentary tells us that while they had their differences, John the Baptist and Jesus, are related by their prophetic teaching…, practice of baptism, and expectation of the end-times. **1**

I. Years ago, when I started paying attention to the way we tell this story, I wondered why we talked about John the Baptist in the beginning of Advent, which is a time to prepare for the birth of the baby Jesus. It seemed to me, we are going out of linear, chronological time. We were looking at the *adult* person who was a *childhood* relation and companion of Jesus, which was a little confusing.

   a. But the thing is, I have come to realize that the lifelong relationship between John and Jesus *is* quite amazing and important to consider. Their mothers, Elizabeth and Mary, who were cousins, visited each other when they were pregnant with each of them. We all know the famous passage about John leaping in his mother's womb when Mary first arrived on her visit to share her happy news.

   b. So although we do not have evidence in the Bible other than this first meeting, it seems very likely that John and Jesus grew up together. I imagine they were rough and tumble boys, in healthy competition, like kids close in age are, throughout their

youth. Their families most likely visited one another from time to time, especially at their religious festivals. Perhaps they had a sense of their destiny, but maybe not until later. They both seemed to go away for a while too, as young adults, because they both came back from somewhere, and at about the same time, to start their ministry.

c. The grown-up John certainly indicated, as written in today's gospel, that he was second to Jesus. He knew who he was, and who he wasn't. His place was to prepare the people for Jesus. He baptized with water, and Jesus baptized with the spirit. Without John preparing the way, the people may not have recognized their need for Jesus, or their need to run to him , metaphorically, when he appeared on the scene.
d. John made people aware of their need for repentance, or metanoia, or a change of mind and heart. Once emptied of their falsehoods, they longed for the Holy One, to fill them with truth. Without John, not as many people would have recognized their need for Jesus. If you read the gospel of John chapter 1, you will see that the writer spends much of the chapter describing the importance of John the Baptist's role. The gospel of John 1:8 is fascinating; "He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light." To have to distinguish the one bearing witness, and the one who was true light, means that John must have been a formidable presence.
e. In short, John the Baptist was helping prepare us all to walk through a threshold.

'Threshold' perhaps is a term our modern ears can better relate to than apocalyptic images of winnowing forks and threats of being thrown into the fire. Perhaps what we let go of (the chaff) is that which is not working for us; and our goodness that remains is the wheat.

So this threshold – listening to and responding to John the Baptist, in our day, involves making a life changing decision to follow, *more nearly,* the One who he is preparing the way for.

Remember the lyrics from the song Day by Day from Godspell, the musical? "Day by day, day by day, Oh dear Lord, three things I pray…to see thee more clearly, follow thee more dearly, love thee more nearly, day by day…". So what would it look like to follow Jesus more nearly?

Well for one thing, things should be different. We are each inevitably going to learn along the way things like: We are resilient. That sometimes the enemy is us. The we need friends. That we need mentors. That we need to work hard and work smart. That we are all flawed. That we will all fail sometimes, and succeed other times. That forgiveness is a gift. We stop being judgmental and fearful, and start seeing the Light in each other today and into the future. We might move closer to what we are called to do and be in the world, once we get out of our own way. One step at a time.

What do we need to have the courage to make that change?

One of my favorite living artists is Makoto Fujimaru. He is also a devout Christian. He reminds us that God our Creator's first action was *making* the heavens and the earth and all that is. He uses the term *making* because it is perhaps more accessible and less intimidating than the word creating – and reminds us we are all made in God's image, and thus we are all makers. It is natural for us to want to be creative and make things. It is this spirit we might come together in the coming months to make things in Spirituality and the Arts workshops here at St. John's. So *making* is a term for all the ways in which we can create – not just in the arts, but in wherever your passion lies. Growing a garden, cooking, carpentry, writing poetry, raising children… these are all ways of being makers. **2**

Rebecca Marek, one of the writers of the blog called **Advent Word** from Forward Day by Day**,** which offers a word for every day during this season for reflection. One her words was Make**.** She writes:

"This Advent, make a plan, make a change, make a difference, make a promise. Make memories, make the most of it, make something of yourself."

"To make something is to act upon it, to bring it into being. It is intentional, purposeful. What are we being asked to make this Advent?"

"Or is that the wrong question? Would it be better to consider what God is trying to make of us? What is the Maker making here, now?"

"We can work so hard to develop ourselves, to get closer to the life we have imagined. Is it possible that in this busy-ness, we lose out on the opportunity to allow God to act upon us, to change us, to fulfill a promise to us, to make something of us?"

If we set aside our understandable preoccupations this Advent, can we see what is being made in us and all around us?

I remember seeing a painting of Jesus' baptism. We see his face in a series of time frames going from looking off to the side, and gradually focusing directly on us; his gaze upon the viewer, like the eyes of a holy icon, pierces our hearts. The point is, Jesus too is seen focusing at his baptism…his life is about to be changed forever as well.

The Changer and the changed, our lives will gradually, over a lifetime, become more and more Christ like, as we walk our spiritual journey. More focused on others. Less focused on self.

We need to remember though, that sometimes we imagine John the Baptist baptizing all the folks in the river, and then seeing everyone skipping home having experienced immediate results. In the twinkle of an eye, they had new insights. They dropped all the behavior that wasn't working for them, refocused, reset, and waiting in hopeful expectation for Jesus to come and baptize them with the Spirit.

However, I think revisiting our baptism threshold is really for most of us, then and now, dropping a seed of life in Christ into our hearts, which slowly but surely, creates the dramatic change that would ultimately help us grow more and more into the image of God, and more deeply into beloved community.

Dan Snyder's writes in his 2022 book, Praying in the Dark, "I suspect that our successes, accomplishments and reputations will never be what interests the angels. They want to know what we do with the misdirection, the wrong turn, our losses and failures, the broken heart, even the depression that breaks misplaced hopes and our addiction to light. He quotes Rilke – "But when I lean over the chasm of myself – it seems my God is dark and like a web: a hundred roots silently drinking." **3**

The soul is like a vast root system that reaches into the earth with ever-finer threads until it finally becomes indistinguishable from the ground that nourishes it.

We are each called to humility, which is more of a going down into a ravine than it is climbing up a mountain. Eventually it means praying in

the dark, away from our day-world-ego-consciousness seeking and all its anxious grasping for knowledge and certainty.

This Advent, let us all spend more time praying in the dark, where Silence, like darkness, is a womb from which a deeper wisdom is born.

The late Irish poet, John O'Donohue, writes about thresholds in his book, To Bless the Space Between Us.

"Change arrives in nature when time has ripened. There are no jagged transitions or crude discontinuities. This accounts for the sureness with which one season succeeds another…

We find ourselves crossing some new threshold we had never anticipated…Then when the grip of some long-enduring winter mentality begins to loosen, we find ourselves vulnerable to a flourish of possibility and we are suddenly negotiating the challenge of a threshold."

At any time we can ask ourselves: At which threshold am I now standing? At this time in my life, what am I leaving? Where am I about to enter? What is preventing me from crossing my next threshold? What gift would enable me to do it?

The time has come to cross.

[This crossing] can free us into a natural courage that casts out fear and opens up our lives to become voyages of discovery, creativity, and compassion. No threshold need be a threat, but rather an invitation and a promise.

Whatever comes, the great sacrament of life will remain faithful to us, blessing us always with visible signs of invisible grace. We merely need to trust." ***4***

So let us accept this radical invitation to a change of heart and mind; and let us prepare to be bearers of the Light in new ways, that will undoubtedly stretch us. Let us run to Jesus, inspired by the renewal of our baptismal promises and filled with hope, and trusting in God that we can be builders of the kingdom on earth in our day, according to his will.

For God is calling us toward greater peacemaking between peoples and between individuals, and Advent is a season both to long for God's shalom and to become lights of that shalom during our challenging times.

Shalom is more than the absence of war, shalom is everything good!

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Footnotes

1. Brown, Raymond, Fitzmeyer Joseph, Murphy, Roland, editors; The New Jerome Biblical Commentary: Matthew 3:1-12
2. Fujimaru, Makoto; Art and Faith, A Theology of Making; Yale University Press, New Haven, CT; p. 61
3. Snyder, Daniel O.; Praying in the Dark; Cascade Books, Eugene, Oregon;
4. O'Donahue, John; To Bless the Space Between Us; Doubleday; 2008; p. 47