

We Work While We Wait

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Dec. 5, 2021

based on Matthew 3:1-12

Once, about 12 years ago, I was driving east on NE Broadway, and I went through a yellow light that became, as they all do, a red light. The moment it turned red a series of lights flashed all at once and I realized I was busted.

A couple of weeks later I got a traffic citation in the mail. On it was a picture of me going through the intersection at the wheel of my car.

Now, of course, I was guilty but it bothered me that they nailed me with a camera.

Not long afterward I spoke with a good friend of mine and told him about my ticket and how the city of Portland had used a camera to get me. My friend smiled and told me of a colleague of his who taught at Portland State. This friend had done the exact same thing I had, and had received the same reward for it in the mail – a ticket for \$242. But instead of appearing before a judge and electing to go to traffic school the way I did, he had simply written a check for the whole amount, took a picture of the check, printed it, then snail-mailed the photo of the check to the city.

“Touche’.”

Then, two weeks later this smart aleck professor received a letter from the Municipal Court. This time they sent him a photo . . . of a pair of handcuffs.

So he sent them the real check.

I loved that. I liked that an institution as dreary as a traffic court could have a sense of humor about such matters. The law was the law, but even the judge and the apparatus behind her, could deal with citizens with a light touch.

You know, there is a lot you can say about John the Baptist. You can even say, as Jesus says, he was "first in the kingdom of God." But you cannot say that he had a sense of humor.

John is a man who wears what no self-respecting man would wear, itchy camel's hair, and he eats what few humans would choose to eat -- grasshoppers. And all day long he's shouting at the people who have come out into the Judean desert to see this oddball prophet: "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near. Bear fruit worthy of repentance."

"Hypocrites are not welcome," he says. "The merely curious can go home. Individuals bearing good fruit will be baptized."

"Individuals bearing bad fruit should expect to be burned with an unquenchable fire once the Messiah shows up," which John says will be very soon. "The ax is already laid at the root of the tree and the tree, which, being rotten, will soon be brought down."

His is the New Testament version of the Hebrew prophet's voice of someone crying out in the wilderness. "Prepare the way of the Lord; make God's paths straight."

John the Baptist's message is not easy to swallow. I mean, it's one thing to be asked to repent of your sins. It's another to be called a "brood of vipers." Actually, the literal translation of that isn't fit for worship, so use your imagination. John was colorful in his choice of words, but he was not funny.

For John, right was right, and wrong was wrong and that was that. Life for John was entirely black n white, with no shades of gray, whatsoever.

Gray areas. When it comes to shades of black do you tend to see black as just jet black, or are there lighter shades on your pallet? Are you someone who cuts other people some slack due to, say, their circumstances, or do you say, "The Ten Commandments were good enough for my grandfather so they are good enough for me. End of discussion"

There is a little known story Abraham Lincoln once told that more than anything else, sizes Lincoln up for me. I think it's pretty wonderful. Here is how he told it ...

Back when I rode the legal circuit in Illinois, I defended a woman from Metmora named Melissa Goings. She was 77 years-old. They said she murdered her husband. He was 83. He was choking her and she grabbed a hold of a stick of firewood and fractured his skull and he died. In his will he wrote: 'I suspect she has killed me. If I get over it, I will have revenge.'

No one was keen to see her convicted; he was that kind of husband. I asked the prosecuting attorney if I might have a short conference with my client. And she and I went into a room in the courthouse, but I alone emerged. The window in the room was found to be wide open.

It was believed the old lady may have climbed out of it. I told the bailiff, "Right before I left her in the room she asked me where she could get a good drink of water. I told her, "Tennessee." Mrs. Goings was seen no more in Metamora. Enough justice had been done; they even forgave the bondsman her bail.

Ok, here's what I think. My guess is that John the Baptist was, at one time, quite the shady character.

Why do I say that? Because knowing lots of various religious folk, as I do, the people who come down the hardest on others are almost always people who believe they deserve major punishment themselves.

They probably won't own up to the specifics of that, but they usually see themselves as guilty as sin.

So, call it projection or what you will, people who love tossing fire and brimstone down on others often eventually confess, or are forced to confess, that their hearts are pretty scummy.

The odd thing, of course, in the case of John the Baptist, was that Jesus wasn't anything like John. But then John could only imagine what he could imagine and his sense of God was that God must be mad as heck, and would act accordingly.

Now, considering the subject of a desire for revenge, think about what happened when Nelson Mandela was about to be let out of prison. Just imagine what a lot of the white leadership in South Africa expected. Here, they had kept this man in prison for 27 years.

Twenty-seven years, after having been sentenced to 5 -- this man who was anything but the anarchist they had painted him to be -- this man who, before and during his imprisonment, spoke only in favor of democracy -- freedom and justice for all South Africans.

The authorities thought he would die in prison during the 5 years of his original sentence. But he didn't. So they kept him as long as they could -- 27.

Once released, they expected his idea of justice would lead to reprisals -- black South Africans punishing minority whites. They expected exactly what they knew they deserved, "Fire" -- just the kind John the Baptist said the world ought to get.

But Nelson Mandela didn't give it to them. No more than Jesus came to earth armed with an ax, or a nuclear weapon seeking revenge.

I'm not saying Mandela was Jesus. We all know he wasn't. He went through several metamorphoses. Some young South Africans are still making up their minds about whether Mandela "sold the farm" to the white minority, but I'll tell you this -- he got his ethical outlook from Jesus, not from John the Baptist.

So let us consider that ethic. Jesus was the one who, when the woman was arrested by a posse of religious fellows for adultery, slowed the whole lynch mob down by bending down to write something in the dirt.

Remember that gesture?

When the posse finally got up the gumption to speak to him, one of them said, "What should be done with such a woman? Moses, the great prophet of Israel said that such a woman ought to be stoned."

We don't know what Jesus was writing there in the dust. All we know is that once he was done, without looking at the woman or the men for that matter, he merely said, "Okay, let him who is without sin cast the first stone," and to their credit, the men dropped their stones and went away one-at-a-time."

You know, I think it was worth all the trouble of him coming to earth just to have said that. And I cannot imagine the religious icon, John the Baptist, ever saying anything like that. Nope.

Jesus was also the one who, when they put him up on a cross with nails still had it in him to say, "Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing."

Now, John is partly right. He knows the world is ripe for something of God to enter it afresh. John is right to point to a visitation that is holy. He is even right in saying that the one who is to come will be bringing fire with him. But the fact is, Jesus is not coming with a fire of destruction. He is coming with a fire of transformation; a fire meant to melt and mold the world into something holy.

Here's a story written and posted on Facebook by a good friend of mine about his own mid-life acquaintance with this kind of transforming "fire" ...

I am not a fan of discomfort. Few of us really are. I have to make a conscious decision to put myself outside my comfort zone. The disappointing part about this, for me, is that I have accumulated a ton of data that tells me life happens outside my comfort zone.

Thirteen years ago, I walked into a treatment center stone cold sober and began living life on life's terms and it was so uncomfortable.

After a minute of sobriety, I left my safe corporate gig and went back to school to try to be of more service to my fellows. I was crawling out of my skin.

The first time I raised my hand in my Master's Program was a Herculeean feat in my mind.

Being the only dude in my first [therapy] training. Horrifying.

Going on my first meditation retreat.

Becoming a dad.

Being a partner.

Starting a business. Every time I speak publicly. Take long hikes or long bike rides with my [peculiar disability]. And on and on and on...

Two years ago I was hurled out of my comfort zone by the loss of my Mom to cancer.

My mom and I did not have an easy relationship. It was full of her mistakes and mine. There was a lot of humanity in our nearly four decades together. She taught me more about unconditional love and forgiveness than I would think any person should need to learn.

I remember one of our final moments together that we were able to really communicate. I was crying because we knew that things were changing and the end was coming and my mom reached out, took my hand in hers, and squeezed it very hard.

I looked up at her through tears to see her beautiful smile change into her stern and piercing gaze that always let us know it was time for business.

She said, "I can't do this for you anymore. It's up to you now. I can't be the person that loves you most on this planet. You have to do it. You are worth it. You are so cool."

Up to this point in my life, I had done a lot of addiction recovery work, a lot of meditation, self-help stuff, hundreds of hours of therapy appointments and on and on. Hell, I'm a therapist. I thought I knew what she was telling me already. I said, "I know, Mom. I will."

I had not known but, in that moment, I got it.

Her final gift to me was permission to let go and fall back into the love that a mother has for their child and make it my own.

For two years now, I have felt comforted by this and empowered by it. It has been an incredible experience.

I feel my mother's spirit in everything I do (mistakes and all) and I know that everything is okay.

Still, there is the matter of today. The anniversary of my mom's passing. This cruel reminder of impermanence and age.

Today, I feel you in my bones, Mom, and am healed by that, but I would so very much love to hold your hand.

As I said, John the Baptist was partly right. He knew the world was ripe for something of God to enter it afresh. John was right in saying that the one who was to come would bring fire with him. But the fact is, Jesus did not come bringing a fire of destruction. He came with a fire of transformation; a fire meant to melt and mold the world, meaning all of us, into something holy, too.

May it minister through us to our families and also our world. Thank God for the lives of John the Baptist, and Jesus, and Nelson Mandela and all who have outgrown a John the Baptist, infantile, black n white view of the world.

Amen

