

“Wild and Precious”

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Luke 1.68-79

Luke 3.1-6

December 5, 2021

On this second Sunday of Advent our attention is drawn to John the Baptist. We won't dwell on him too long because he is the one who points to the Messiah, but he is worth noting as he is described in both of our Gospel readings today. He is the poster child of Advent, the one who is deemed to pave the way for Christ, and who challenges us to think about how we prepare for the coming of Christ in a broken world. We'll address why in a little bit.

We first meet John the Baptist in chapter one of Luke. This passage is taken from a larger portion that gives some background information. The words here are spoken by Zechariah, John's father. This may not seem like anything other than an ecstatic new father's soliloquy after holding his child for the first time, but it truly is so much more. Zechariah was a priest. His wife, Elizabeth, was not able to bear a child and when Zechariah had temple duties, entering the holiest place of the temple, an angel informed him Elizabeth would, in fact, have a child.

Zechariah was unwilling to hear or believe this angel. He and his wife had dealt with infertility for years, and maybe even had come to the conclusion within himself that they would never have a child. To have someone else tell him otherwise would have shaken his whole being. When he finds out Elizabeth is with child, the angel tells Zechariah that he won't be able to speak for the entire length of her pregnancy.

Here in Luke, at the circumcision ritual of his newborn son, he has regained his voice. The first words he speaks are in praise of God. His first words are that of gratitude. In a broken world, in a time when it seems so much is out of our control, gratitude can be difficult to wrap our heads around, but sometimes it comes easily off our tongues. Zechariah is an incredibly relatable biblical character. At the beginning he is skeptical and unsure. At the end of our time with him he is full of gratitude. I don't know about you, but I found myself on both sides of that spectrum just this week.

In many ways Zechariah's story paves the way for John the Baptist's. For one, the author of Luke gives great authority to historical context and genealogy. John came from Zechariah, a priest. Elizabeth, John's mother, was cousin to Mary. When Mary found out she was going to have God's son, she immediately ran to Elizabeth. Both of them pregnant, the babies leap in the womb, a sense of God among them.

So, we know the priestly background of John, as well as the connection to Mary and Jesus. So, when we jump to chapter 3 of Luke, we have a bit of background about this enigmatic figure. If we know that Zechariah was a priest, we can assume that John was a clergy kid – or a PK/pastor's kid, as we call it in PCUSA terms. PKs are unique in many ways because they see ministry from a different side – they see their parent's hard work, they see the inside of the

church, they see the sacred mixed with the secular, and I think that their own faith always comes out in a fascinating and beautiful way. We don't know about John's faith journey. He's such a vague figure who appears long enough to proclaim, baptize, and disappear, and then we hear about him during the Lenten journey when his head ends up on a platter for the king.

I said earlier that John is a sort of the poster child for Advent. Part of this is because he prepares the way for Jesus. Advent is about waiting and preparation, and John tells us how to do this. He actively goes out and tells people about the Messiah. He is bold and unafraid. He sets the tone for Jesus.

John also is the quintessential Advent figure because he is so unusual. He is counter cultural. John lived in the wilderness and ate wild honey and locusts. He wore camel hair and was just different from everyone else. He always makes me think of this rugged hippy that lives off the grid and doesn't speak often, but when he does, everyone listens.

Rev. Willie Dwayne Francois III, a Baptist minister in New Jersey, focuses on the "wildness" of John the Baptist. He takes from a poem by Henry David Thoreau that says, "in wildness is the preservation of the world."¹ Francois writes about how John the Baptist, this very unconventional character, enters the world to shake the status quo – even just a little bit. We know that Jesus will challenge rulers and religious leaders of his time, and this will be more shocking to the world than John the Baptist, but John is just there to give them a prep course on what is to come. The beginning of this passage even tells us a list of who is in a position of power. To list the rulers tells us exactly what is going on in the world. When we tell a story and say who the president was, we are giving information about the political climate of the time. The author of Luke is telling us of the oppressive powers at work in this story.

Our world has changed dramatically in the past few years. How much have we conformed to old ways and how much have we firmly said, "God wants something different"? Francois goes on to say, "We stagger into new days with old patterns – tamed by patriarchy, domesticated by Whiteness, programmed by capitalism, disciplined by heterosexism. To be wild is to be free, unbought, and unbossed by the structures of power."² John the Baptist is telling us not to conform to the oppressive systems that try to divide people and pit one another against each other. Jesus is coming to tear those systems down, so we can prepare by recognizing our own systemic contributions and repent, as John always said, and to turn away from sin. It means recognizing a new way in which people are not labeled and put into categories, but welcomed as they are and loved deeply. It means celebrating God's great diversity in the world and feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and lifting up the poor – just as Matthew 25 teaches us.

Christmas is often a time when we want everything to be comfortable and perfect. We put up the tree and deck the halls and put everything in its place – but in truth Advent leads us to

¹ Willie Dwayne Francois III, "Living By the Word" December 5, Advent 2C (Luke 3.1-6), <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/december-5-advent-2c-luke-31-6>.

² Ibid.

discomfort. It moves us away from our perception of perfection, and nudges us out of our comfort zones into action.

Francois' description of Thoreau's poem of wildness made me think of another poet, Mary Oliver. In her poem, "The Summer Day," she describes the beauty of creation. She ponders who made creatures and observes a grasshopper. As she describes the grasshopper, she states that prayer is not something that comes naturally to her, but she does "know how to pay attention." This is our job in life, but especially in Advent. As we wait, we pay attention. As we discussed last week, we stay alert. We see the pain in the world. We recognize the hurt and not be overcome with despair when we see yet another school shooting in our own backyard. We won't be overwhelmed when faced with an ongoing pandemic. We won't be hopeless when we hear leadership spout hatred in our world. Instead, we will know that God came to change this broken world. Instead, we will be filled with hope because we knew that God sent John the Baptist to prepare. We will be filled with love because God came to be with humanity as a child. We won't be overwhelmed, but equipped to make changes in the world.

Oliver ends her poem by asking, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" Perhaps this is what we ask ourselves the second Sunday of Advent. How will we live in a way that is wild and unusual, going against the grain and refusing to be part of harmful patterns? How will we spend our wild life, intentionally challenging status quo so as to be welcoming to those outside the margins? How will we live our lives in a way that shows how incredibly precious and valuable each of us is in God's eyes?

As we continue into Advent, be blessed in the knowledge that God has given you this one wild and precious life. Be comforted that God's love is often found in the uncomfortable. Go and live your one wild and precious life, thanks be to God. Amen.