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St. Timothy's Episcopal Church
Calhoun, GA

Advent 3, Year "B" {RCL}: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 Psalm 126, 1 Thess 5: 16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Title: Merry Christmas From John the Baptizer

It's that time of year again.

That time of year when certain things are more or less predictable in our lives. There will be some Christmas shopping to do -- shopping for gifts for friends and loved ones -- gifts hopefully which are but representations of the great gift that we remember and recognize this time of year -- Emmanuel. Christ. God With Us.

It's also that time of year when Christmas songs begin wafting through the air. Shopping malls play them. Somewher choirs are maybe rehearsing them. We hear them on the radio. We even find ourselves sometimes humming them.

Were it not for the intrusion of the virus, parties, gatherings, get-togethers would be part of the landscape.

It's also a time when cards are both sent and received. You know the cards I speak of -- they mostly begin with phrases like "Season's Greetings, or Happy Holidays, or -- one of my favorites -- Wishing you the special gift of Christmas: Peace, Hope, and Love." And there are winter scenes. And there are manger scenes. Decorative and brightly colored scenes.

I remember one card I received last year that was particularly memorable. It said, "Peace to all Good Folk." That made me kind of wonder if the sender would have been an advocate for denying peace to those they considered to be something other than 'the good folk.' I thought that was an interesting greeting.

But there is one card that is *not* on my mantle. And I'll bet you didn't get one either. And that's the card with John the Baptist on it. Fact is, I don't think I've ever seen that particular card. Let's see, on the front it would depict a wild-eyed, wild-looking fellow, dressed in animal furs. Bearded. And instead of REJOICE, the caption on the front cover would probably simply say REPENT! Then maybe you'd open it up and on the inside it would say something like, "Wishing you and yours a season of Baptism by Fire."

What do you think? Think if we were to send that idea to Hallmark, think they'd pay us for it? Well, probably not.

So, why DO we have to deal with this fellow every year in order to get to Christmas? This John who would seem part religious fanatic, part homeless man, part street preacher, and if we dare tlook past that which annoys us about him – part prophet.

Well, fact is, that IS why we must deal with John. Not because he was eccentric. But because he was a prophet. And not just any prophet. But a prophet of particular importance, in a particular time, and in a particular place, to make a particular pronouncement. And that which he announces is this: HE IS COMING. The anticipated Messiah is here. Behold, the Lamb of God. And his name is Jesus.

John is the bridge over which we must pass to get to Christmas.

There have been other prophets to be sure. Prophets that preceded John. Prophets like Isaiah who declared in the name of God that God's creation was moving, moving from what had been to what was to come. Announced that God is still creating. And God's creation is moving away from the former things toward a thing of greater perfection, and peace, and blessing.

The Old Testament scriptures are full of such descriptions of how God is moving in the world and is in history. And not only did the prophets of old speak of a God whose hand is on the world, but also of God's anointed, Messiah, who is to come and who will be in the world. God with us.

But John is the bridge. -- the bridge between the Old Testament *anticipation* of the Messiah who is to come and the New Testament *reality* of Jesus.

But if John is the bridge, he is not a bridge of the usual kind. For most bridges ask little of us. I mean we just use the bridge to go over to the other side of the river or maybe the railroad tracks. We don't tend to think about who built the bridge or who decided that there should be a bridge in this particular spot.

But the bridge that is John the Baptist – now that is not so easily ignored.

No, the Gospel writers and those who decide what scriptures we will read on any given Sunday know full well that *we dare not* ignore this bridge. We dare not get to Christmas too quick. No, it is first necessary that we take a detour down by the Jordan River and have an encounter with this John the Baptizer. For if we get to Bethlehem too quickly, we run the very serious risk of arriving at a stable, acknowledging a cute little new-born, Hallmark baby in swaddling clothes. And we run the risk of exchanging a few gifts, singing a few carols, only to have completely missed the point. To have not recognized Jesus at all.

This is why I think John is so excited, so animated, so enthusiastic, so insistent, so intent, so sort of "in our faces" about this Jesus and the repentance that is required of us in order that we might recognize him, and come to a full realization of who he is. John desperately desires that we not miss the point.

Jesus is not just a baby. He is messiah. He is who will usher in the new creation of new possibilities and hope.

So, each year as we Episcopalians approach the Christmas event in our remembering and in our worship, we get there through John the Baptist or as John Prine would say, "at least 'round here we do."

I said a few moments ago that John was no ordinary bridge. And, indeed, he is not. For John does not invite us to cross over to Jesus high and dry. Rather John invites us to wade into the river of repentance. To wash away the old and to embrace the new, the clean, the fresh, and the re-freshed which comes as a gift from God through this Jesus.

John invites us to enter into the waters of renewal, the waters of our baptisms drowning our sins; flushing that which made us ashamed or to feel guilty. Invites us indeed to move past that which destroys our humanity and look toward that which edifies.

And the Gospel writers -- all of them -- and the designers of our lectionary seem to know full well that we dare not rush too quickly pass John to Christmas. For to do so is fraught with danger. To do so is to run the risk of making Jesus into a champion of our own greed, a protector of our privilege, a partner in our prejudices, an antagonist *toward* rather than an *advocate for* the poor, the down-trodden, the stranger. And it can be to run the risk of making Jesus a co-conspirator of our own propensity to violence.

The Gospel writer's do not present us with such a Jesus. And John is the bridge to Jesus. And at the entrance to the bridge is a sign which says, "Be careful that you do not diminish this Jesus. Do not make him into a God of your own creation, but recognize him for who he is: God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father."

Come into the waters of Baptism and be refreshed, be forgiven, receive new life. But do not misinterpret these waters as meant to dilute the meaning of this Christ whom we welcome on Christmas Day. Rather know that the waters of our baptism is full-strength. And as you pass through them you emerge fully clothed in the hope that is embodied in this babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

John is the one who reminds that the path to Bethlehem is across the bridge of repentance. Repentance. A word which tends to get bad press in our world these days.

We tend to think of repentance as a sort of 'downer' word. A kind of a negative thing associated with a kind of self-flagellation. But really, that's not the nature of true repentance at all. True repentance is more about that which leads to a positive change, the expectation of better things, blessings, and new possibilities. The consequence of repentance is new life. True repentance, rightly understood and experienced is not associated with dread, but rather with excited anticipation. It is a good and wonderful thing. A gift really of the most marvelous kind.

And it John the Baptist who as much, if not more than any other prophet, points us to this Jesus who is the source of it all.

So, now that I think about it, maybe that John the Baptist Christmas card – you know, the one that has the word Repent on the front of the of it... maybe that Christmas card is not such a bad idea after all.

Amen.