

BAPTISM WITH FIRE

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Matthew 3:1-12

One night this week, I was at home. It was early evening and it was cold outside. It was dark too because the sun, it seems, had decided to call it quits around noon. I have to admit, I was tired and a little depressed by the cold and the dark. It happens this time of year. So, there I am at home, sitting in a chair flipping through a magazine when I encountered a full-page advertisement featuring a man and a woman walking on a sparkling white beach next to a turquoise ocean. The sun was bright and I could only imagine the reading on the local thermometer—quite different from my current situation.

This advertisement was for an all-inclusive beach resort called Sandals. That name, Sandals, has always amused me. It's rather silly, but makes its point. We associate wearing sandals with being casual and relaxed. You don't wear sandals when you have responsibilities. Sandals are comfortable, playful. You wear sandals at the beach when it is warm. If I am going to a Caribbean resort to escape the dreary cold of winter, then I would prefer to go to a place called Sandals as opposed to a place called Frozen Tundra Resort. Just like I would rather not eat at a restaurant called Stomach Cramp Bistro.

In our reading for today, John the Baptist discusses sandals. But he is not packing for his vacation. He is speaking of the footwear of the Messiah. And those sandals, he asserts, he is not worthy to carry.

In John's day, sandals were not casual footwear; they were everyday shoes. The styles were not all that different from the sandals we wear today. They were constructed of two to three layers of leather sewn together as the sole. There were straps attached to the sole that held the sandal to the foot. In Palestine, the straps were simple. Those sandals with ornamental straps that wrap up the leg were a fashion accessory made popular by the Romans.

While sandals are good at protecting the bottoms of your feet as you walk, they are not so good at keeping your feet clean like a fully enclosed shoe. In John's day, walking through any village or town meant that you were probably walking through what I'll just refer to as 'muck.' The streets were likely paved with a compacted mixture of animal droppings, household garbage, and even human waste. Streets served as open sewers. To walk down a street meant that your feet were going to get caked in disgusting muck. Your feet would be filthy and your sandals would be filthier. It is for this reason that in middle eastern cultures today the shoe is considered offensive. To show someone the bottoms of your shoe is highly insulting. It's dirty.

Knowledge of muck gives weight to John's confession when he says, *I am not worthy to carry his sandals*. John is talking about the Messiah—the one the Jews were looking for and waiting for, the one who would save the people. The verb for carrying is a word associated with slaves or servants. It was their job to carry or bear items for the master. Carrying the master's sandals would have fallen to the lowest of the slaves. People have inquired if John is the Messiah and he makes it clear that no, he is not. He is not worthy to be even the master's lowliest servant and hold his muck-encrusted shoes.

John the Baptist is one of the most interesting people that we meet in the New Testament. The Gospel of Luke describes in detail John's birth to Elizabeth and Zechariah. All four gospels begin their chronicle of Jesus' ministry by introducing John. John is the one who sets the stage for the coming Messiah.

John was a preacher. His father had been a priest and John may have been a priest as well. Although we have no evidence, it is speculated that John was a member of the Jewish religious sect known as the Essenes. Essenes lived in monastic communities, they held their property in common, and they took vows of poverty. They meticulously observed the Law of Moses, the Sabbath, and the laws of ritual purity.

John's ministry was centered in the Judean wilderness at the Jordan River south of Jerusalem. John preached a message of repentance. His core message, one that Jesus himself would also employ, was, *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*.

There is no doubt that in his day John was something of a celebrity. He's mentioned in all four gospels. We read that the people left the cities to go out and hear him preach even in the wilderness. Even King Herod knew about John the Baptist. One thing that set John apart was his mode of dress. John dressed like an old-timey prophet with his camel hair cloak cinched tight with a leather belt. The people of his day looked at him the same way that we might look at someone dressed like George Washington. John ate simple foods found in the wilderness. To the first century Judaeans, John was a person from another time and place. Furthermore, he preached using the words of the ancient prophets, such as Isaiah. Because of all this, people wanted to know if he was the promised Messiah. John said that he was not.

In his preaching, John warns the people that they must get ready. They must prepare themselves. God's kingdom was coming near. One way they could prepare was to repent, to change their lives, to follow God's will, to seek out God's path. To illustrate this repentance, John invited the people to be baptized. John's baptism is not like the baptism instituted by Jesus that we observe. Rather, it was a ceremonial washing—something the Essene community practiced every day. Our baptism marks the inauguration of a new way of life in Christ.

Today is the Second Sunday of the season of Advent. Christmas will be here soon. Christmas is our celebration of God's incarnation—God coming to us in the flesh, as one of us.

Imagine that you wanted to learn a new language, you wanted to learn to speak Mandarin. So, you sign up for an online Internet course to learn Mandarin. And you try really hard. You are diligent and you work day after day, week after week for what seems like forever. But you simply can't get it. You can't grasp the language. Finally, the creator of this language course contacts you and sends you the message that in four weeks he will be coming to you to tutor you in person. He commits to work with you until you become fluent in Mandarin. That is what we celebrate at Christmas, that God comes to us to help us find our way, to show us the way himself. Last Sunday, we read these words from the Prophet Isaiah, *Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord ...that he may teach us his ways*. To know salvation is to know God's ways.

God comes to us but God doesn't show up unannounced. God sends messengers and prophets to proclaim his arrival—agents such as Isaiah and John. As John proclaims to the people, *I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire*. God will come and claim us with love and judgment.

The Season of Advent is not just four weeks of our year positioned just before Christmas. Advent is that time between when we receive the message that God is coming and when God finally arrives. Advent is the time for us to get ready, to clean the house, stock the pantry, make up the guest bed—time to prepare our souls to stand in the presence of the Lord. God came to us as Jesus the Christ and God will come again in glory. We have heard the announcement; we got the email. Are we getting prepared? Advent is a time for us to prepare for God's kingdom.

One last thing: if we look at the Fourth Gospel—the Gospel According to John (different John)—we find something startling. Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem for the Passover festival and have reserved a room where they may eat together. They don't know it but this will be Jesus' final meal with them. He will be arrested that night. Before the meal begins, as the disciples have gathered, Jesus takes a towel and a basin of water and he goes around and washes the feet of his disciples. Ordinary hospitality required a host simply to provide water for their guests to wash their feet. The host was not expected to do the washing. A slave could be assigned the task. Years earlier, John the Baptist stated that he was not worthy even to carry the sandals of the coming Savior, and now we see Jesus, the master, the Messiah, stooping down to clean the muck of the world off the feet of his followers.

In the Season of Advent, it is crucial to remember the God whose birth we celebrate and whose presence we anticipate. This is what we prepare for. We are waiting for the God who is creator but who also bows down to us in humble service. We are not worthy and yet he loves us.