

Look Again

If you've heard the story of John the Baptist once, you've heard it a million times.

We all know the story so well perhaps we barely pay attention anymore.

This strange guy heads out into the desert, wearing clothes that make him look like a hairy animal, eating bugs, telling people they better shape up or ship out — and then he dunks them in water.

That is the common understanding of what we just heard this morning.

But truth be told, that common understanding barely scratches the surface.

In fact, that common understanding actually misses the boat entirely with what's happening this morning.

It all begins in the desert.

And when we think about the desert, and compare it to what happens in our cities and towns, what we see is stark contrast.

In town, there's lots of people, food, shelter and water; because, towns are the place where we take care of **ourselves**, and we're good at it!

But the desert is that place far from all of those comforts, all of that independence.

The desert is a place where we stand naked before God: vulnerable, needy, perhaps even frightened.

That's where John shows up.

His message is not a welcome one.

We know that because the country club Republicans (otherwise known as the Sadducees), and the liberal Democrats, (otherwise known as the Pharisees), are anxious to wag their fingers and criticize what he's all about.

Neither of these groups think much about John.

We know that because, as the old Middle Eastern saying goes, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend:" meaning, while the Pharisees and Sadducees can't stand each other, they are bosom buddies when it comes to being outraged by John.

So why the camel hair and leather belt and locusts and honey?

For us, it's merely a description of what he's wearing and what he's eating.

But to the Jewish people standing on that river bank, they are reminded of something very powerful.

They are reminded of one of the two folks who met with Jesus on that mountain when he was transfigured.

Remember?

There was Moses, the law giver, there was Jesus, and there was Elijah, the greatest of all the prophets.

And the reason the Jewish people would've thought of Elijah when they see what John the Baptist is wearing and eating is because they remember the days when Elijah was on the move.

They remember when he lived and worked in a country much like ours today: one where the king is corrupt, where worship of false gods is all the rage, when it is easy to be cruel to the poor and vulnerable.

Well, that King, it turns out, falls down in the palace shower and hurts himself.

Rather than seek God's help for healing, he heads off to the neighboring country where he prays to their god, the god of nuclear weapons or maybe an idol named Baal?

When Elijah gets word of this he tells the King's chief of staff that the king will surely die because of his unfaithfulness.

Which naturally upsets the king, who demands to know who has the temerity to say such a thing about his majesty.

And the reply from the chief of staff is: "he is a hairy man who wears a leather belt around his waist."

So when the Jewish people see John the Baptist, wearing camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, they're thinking: "Elijah is back!"

He's back after being taken up on that fiery chariot into the heavens, the prophecy being that when the Messiah comes, Elijah will return to lead the way.

But we're only getting started.

Because next comes the honey John eats, which also reminds the people of Elijah.

When God was upset with the people of Israel for worshiping their big screen TVs instead of taking care of one another, God writes out his judgment against the people on a scroll and then tells Elijah — eat the scroll!

Which he does, and to his surprise, the scroll tastes like honey!

God's judgment tastes like honey!

Now, hold that image in your left hand while we dive with your right hand into the other half of John's diet, the locusts!

What were the locusts most famous for in the older testament?

The locusts are one of the 10 plagues that God sends against the pharaoh in Egypt as Moses tries to convince pharaoh to free the people.

The locusts represent God's judgment!

They are sent **NOT** for the purpose of punishing pharaoh, but to soften his heart, so that he will relent, and let the enslaved people go.

John eats the locusts to encourage the people to eat God's judgment!

Like Elijah, who eats the scroll of God's judgment, John the Baptist is showing the people that the point of God's judgment is not to condemn, punish, or send you to hell for forever and a day.

The point of God's judgment is to soften our hearts.

Meaning, that God's judgment, once eaten, (once accepted, once surrendered to, once embraced) is as sweet as honey.

In other words, when we examine ourselves, when we look deeply at our defects of character, or angers or greeds or pettiness, when we take an honest accounting of these things, what we find is not shame or humiliation, but freedom, peace, and the gentle breeze of God's spirit moving through us.

We find healing.

And that brings us to the centerpiece of today's Gospel lesson, the unfortunately translated word "repent".

It's the translation from the Greek: metanoia, and metanoia means something far more wonderful than "repent."

For us, to repent means saying "I'm sorry, I won't do it again."

But Metanoia is about a whole new category of being in the world, a whole new way of thinking, acting, believing.

"Meta" for large, "Noia" for mind — means entering into the larger mind — of God.

It's not an accident that we call bigoted, mean-spirited or short-tempered people "small-minded."

To be "small-minded" is to see only from my own perspective, to see only what's right in front of my nose, so that I miss the bigger picture of life around me.

When someone hurts me, and I get all wrapped up in the hurt, I fail to step back and look at the bigger picture of where that person is coming from, where they've been.

I don't stop to wonder what their struggles are, which probably led them to do whatever bad thing they did.

But God sees from every perspective, and takes all of who we are and what we've been through, into account.

Metanoia invites us to enter into God's perspective.

To see the big picture about ourselves and about our neighbors and about every human being.

To be broad-minded, not small-minded.

And when we begin to enter that larger mind, everything changes.

We no longer focus just on ourselves or our injuries or our personal issues.

Instead, we dive into the vast ocean of other people in our community.

We are no longer so easily hurt or insulted, because we begin to see that others are also wounded and in need of our compassion and understanding.

As we are of theirs.

This is the change that John the Baptist is imploring from his people.

This is why he says God can raise up from stones, children of Abraham, because so many of Abraham's children have hearts of stone.

And yet, if we are willing to swallow God's judgment, we will find, not punishment, but a softening, of our hearts.

In our society, this is the season of frantic running about, endless anxiety over what to buy for whoever, constantly examining our finances to see how badly we will feel in January when the credit card bills arrive.

So we gather here these four weeks before Christmas to say "no" to our society's demands.

We gather here these four weeks before Christmas to take our own time away in the desert.

To stand naked and vulnerable before God.

And what we discover is not fear or loathing or insecurity.

Instead, we encounter the God who is longing to know us at the very center of our being, which is where we meet God's judgment, and that judgment becomes the pathway into God's larger mind.

In that larger mind, we discover what John is so desperately trying to tell us: that the judgment of God is the sweetest honey you will ever taste.

And that's a truth we can never hear too often.

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