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All Saints' Episcopal Church  
Advent 2-A, Dec. 4, 2022

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-19

Romans 15:4-13

Matt 3: 1-12

Through the season of Advent we become more familiar with the character of John the Baptist. There had not been a prophet in Israel for 200 years, so in one sense they were ripe for one, especially since their kingdom had become absorbed into the Roman Empire. We hear of this crazy character out in the Jordan River valley calling people to repentance like Elijah and the prophets of old. And, as in days of old, the prophets taught that returning to faithfulness to God would set all things right and would secure the nation of Israel.

John, like Elijah, lived a very ascetic life, and even his diet and wardrobe are described in this passage. And for those who were wondering if his camel hair coat came from Saks or Macys, I think it was a bit more homespun than that. John was something of a hermit, stripped-down preacher. Of course, it is important to remember that the prophecy was that Elijah would return before the Messiah came. Even today at Passover every Jewish Seder, celebrating the time when the people of Israel were spared from Pharaoh's wrath and the angel of death, a place is set at every table for Elijah. For those looking for the Messiah, John became a good excuse for the return of Elijah.

But interestingly, the people flocked to him, and even the Pharisees and Sadducees—the religious elite of his day—were curious about him and feared him a little. The Pharisees were actually a reform movement very much in the same kind of vein as John, but the Sadducees were more of the religious establishment that had made their uneasy peace with Rome. If you get them confused, one of the things that distinguished them was that the Pharisees believed in the resurrection, whereas the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead.....'sad, you see'. But as they came, he called them out for what they were—arrogant and proud of their

pedigree and their religious observance. John tells them that God could change the stones into children of Abraham!

I suppose, every once in a while, there is a need for a John the Baptist. When things seem to have gone off the rails and the people are on the edge of despair, a steady morale voice can renew a whole generation. But, like John the Baptist, there is always a danger with celebrity preachers that we go out to the Jordan River or the super dome, have some emotional conversion experience, and then it doesn't stay grounded in anything. As in Jesus' parable of the sower, some seed fell on rocky soil and couldn't take root. So too, there are those who get caught up in spiritual emotion, but leave it quickly behind once the emotional experience is over. Faithfulness is hard work.

What can sustain us through the tough times is hope—the signature word of Advent as I mentioned last week. Our hope is perhaps not so rooted to this world—as in restoring the Davidic kingdom, nevertheless it is a hope that sustains. And hope, for Christians, is not wishful thinking, or something not grounded in anything real. Hope springs from faith, and for us, as in the letter to the Hebrews, “... faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” (Heb 11:1). Faith and hope are two sides of the same coin.

This faith and hope were, for us, born at the incarnation of God in Christ. How we understand that and how we live that in our life today makes all the difference, because Christ is not just up there somewhere. Christ is in us! As we awake to this and live this, it enlivens us and sparks the hope and faith that strides confidently into the future.

I have recently been reading *Contemplating Christ: The Gospels and the Interior Life*, by Vincent Pizzuto, and Episcopal priest and professor. In it I found this gem of a poem by St. Symeon the New Theologian, from the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. In it he startles us with the depth of understanding the incarnation, which grounds our faith and hope.

We awaken in Christ's body  
As Christ awakens our bodies,  
And my poor hand is Christ, He enters  
My foot, and is infinitely me.

I move my hand, and wonderfully  
My hand becomes Christ, becomes all of Him  
(for God is indivisibly  
Whole, seamless in His Godhood).

I move my foot, and at once  
He appears like a flash of lightning.  
Do my words seem blasphemous? -Then

**Open your heart to Him**

**And let yourself receive the one**

**Who is opening to you so deeply.**

For if we genuinely love Him,  
We wake up inside Christ's body where all our body, all over,  
Every most hidden part of it,  
Is realized in joy as Him,  
And He makes us, utterly, real,  
And every thing that is hurt, everything  
That seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful,  
Maimed, ugly, irreparably  
Damaged, is in Him transformed  
And recognized as whole, as lovely,  
And radiant in His light  
He awakens as the Beloved  
In every last part of our body.

Pizzuto goes on to say, "The fact that most Christians today would be confused and even scandalized by this almost unqualified union between Christ and humanity as expressed in St. Symeon's poem marks a radical failure of the church to communicate to the modern world its greatest spiritual treasure: *The incarnation has made mystics of us all*. In its wake, the modern invention of biblical literalism has rushed in to fill the void. As a result, Christianity has been reduced to a new kind of Pharisaism centered on moral scrupulosity and obsessed with personal salvation. Unable to see Christ immanent in one's own body, in material flesh, in creation itself, Christ remains a distant overlord rather than the Cosmic Christ whose life-

giving energy pulsates through every living atom. Having forfeited the cosmic dimension of salvation history, we have no way of conveying what it means that in Christ heaven and earth interpenetrate the other. That all ground is holy ground. All water is holy water. All bread is Eucharist. All life—not merely human life—is sacred. The cosmos is itself a sacrament and the church a microcosm of the universe.” (p. 17, *Contemplating Christ: The Gospels and the Interior Life*, Vincent Pizzuto)

So, you see, our hope is not about waiting for some John the Baptist, some great preacher to read the riot act to us to get us back in good with God. For Christians our hope is waking to the wonder, power, and beauty of the Cosmic Christ in us.

Finally, Paul gives this wonderful benediction that lives on in pastoral blessings today: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.* Maybe our time is ripe for a John the Baptist too. Maybe God will send a messenger to the world. But, until then, we are God’s messengers—filled with hope, the power of the Holy Spirit, the grace of a love for one another, and a drive to care for the whole creation born of God.

**Open your heart to Him,    And let yourself receive the one,  
Who is opening to you so deeply.**