

Advent 2 – Dec 6/09

When I get an image of John the Baptizer in my mind, and when I hear his words: “Prepare the way of the Lord....Make a straight path...”

The picture I most often get, is big and dramatic, like his words seem to be. I think of making a straight path in the desert....and I think of what I know about making a straight path. I was born and raised in northwestern Ontario. I know something of those who laboured to make paths and roads there. I imagine it was that way here too. To make a road, and to make it straight, you need dynamite - and lots of it. You blast through the rock of the Precambrian shield to get the straight path you’re trying to build.

John the Baptizer is a dynamite kind of figure, do you find? “Subtle” would not be the first word that comes to mind when you describe him.

Here’s how Frederick Buechner says it:

“JB didn’t fool around. He lived in the wilderness around the Dead Sea. He subsisted on a starvation diet, and so did his disciples. He wore clothes that even the rummage sale people wouldn’t have handled. When he preached, it was fire and brimstone every time. The kingdom was coming all right, he said, but if you thought it was going to be a tea party, you’d better think again. If you didn’t shape up, God would give you the axe like an elm with the blight or toss you into the incinerator like what’s left over when you’ve lambasted the good out of the wheat. He said being a Jew wouldn’t get you any more points than being a Hottentot, and one of his favourite ways of addressing his congregation was as a snake pit. Your only hope, he said, was to clean up your life as if your life depended on it, - which it did – and get baptized in a hurry as a sign that you had.

Some people thought he was Elijah come back from the grave, and some others thought he was the Messiah, but John would have none of either. “I’m the one yelling himself blue in the face in the wilderness” he said, quoting Isaiah. “I’m the one trying to knock some sense into your heads”. (Peculiar Treasures, pg 69&70)

There are those who say that what John was doing was offering a radically new vision: religious and political and economic – a vision that challenged the core of what had become a mentality of the elite. Morton Smith (I’ve included a quote of his in your bulletin) says

“By John’s time, the only place in the country where Jews could legally offer sacrifice, was Jerusalem, and its services were expensive. The ordinary peasant eking out a living in the fields or on the sea simply could not travel to the capital to make the required sacrifices and attend the obligatory religious festivals. What John did was to introduce a new, inexpensive, generally available, divinely authorized rite, effective for the remission of all sins. This was his great invention. Prophets had been warning of a coming judgment for centuries. The new thing was the assurance that there was something that the average person could do about it; could do to prepare.”

Certainly John knows what he's doing in taking people out into the wilderness. Picture this: in going to John for baptism, people had to cross into the Jordan, then back again into the land.

THAT IS EXODUS LANGUAGE. THAT is imagery and action that touch the Jewish soul in its deepest place. Whatever else his baptism meant to them, even the most illiterate or untempled Jew would know in their bones the stories of exodus. It would be as though someone took US out to a barn, where there was a star and a newborn baby and shepherds. You can't miss it. It's screaming at you SOMETHING BIG IS GOING ON HERE. The Jordan: crossing into it and then into the land – is the story that defines and feeds and propels Jews to this day. He knew what he was doing.....

John is physically enacting their story...he is preparing a conquered people to reenter and reclaim the Promised Land.

NO WONDER he made the powers-that-be nervous!

He's quite a figure, is John the Baptizer.
When you picture him, what's his posture?

Intense, standing tall, fist shaking, finger wagging, pulpit pounding preacher body?

What does his body look like as he bends to the bodies of those who have come to be immersed in the Jordan?

Bless his heart – John – we need prophets like John. Passionate angry heralds of the future – those who care so deeply that they become consumed by their passion – we need them. Within our own lives and in our own history we've had people like that. (like who?)

And bless their hearts – often they are dismissed; the consuming passion of their hearts made the butt of jokes over bagels at Tim's and on late night talk shows. And often as well they end up burning up, or out, and we can find them on park benches or on prozac or in psychiatric wings of hospitals. Bless their hearts all of them. They're hard to be around and we need them badly.

But you know....there's another side to John, I think...or at least to his message.
And also, a different way to prepare; a different posture of preparation.
As I was working with this text this week, I suddenly got an image of my mom, preparing a piece of ground for planting bulbs.

On her knees, bent to the task of preparation. A little plot of ground, her hands digging, smoothing, weeding, removing rocks, smoothing it over again, adding compost, digging it in carefully,

Head and back bent to the task, concentrating on one small piece of ground that at that moment deserved, and got, all her attention.

That too is what preparing for God is like. In fact, most often it's like that. And today, it seems to me that John is inviting us to that posture: to bend to whatever task is before us – it's not dramatic work; not newsworthy or glamorous. But genuine, and faithful engagement with the "to do" list items that are the building blocks of peace.

For example;

- 1) a trip I once took to Guatemala, with the solidarity network of the UCC in Atlantic Canada. We were there to make relationships and learn about one another and do what we could to support the vital human rights work there. I had read some of the history, which is dramatic and horrible and newsworthy and I'm not sure what I expected from the human rights workers there, but what they were doing was filling out forms, one by one, for people to be able to vote. Office work. Forms. Walking with people when they went to register. Making sure the generator kept the power going so they'd have contact with others. Carrying buckets of water because...long story but they had only one well in the village. Heads and backs bent to simple tasks. The tasks that prepare for peace.
- 2) Upcoming in Copenhagen. There is a way in which the people there will decide the future of this planet. How much more newsworthy can that be? But I'm guessing that much of the work that Joy and others will be doing there will be things like small acts of diplomacy, building relationships that may lead to more openness...drafting document after document, maybe proofreading and moving apostrophes around. Peace is built bit by tiny bit, by people who don't count themselves too important to carry water or edit a draft.
- 3) In this community on Friday night there will be a simple vigil to hold that Copenhagen gathering in our prayers. It may get coverage and it may not. We will simply gather around a fire, take turns tending it and joining our intentions for a healthy planet. Tasks like making coffee are the kinds of tasks that will make it go well or not.

Prepare the way of the Lord. Make a straight path, John says.

And we say "John – I WOULD, I really would...but I have three loads of laundry to do before tomorrow and my desk looks like a hurricane hit it and the kids have to have a ride to hockey and I promised my friend that I'd go with her to a concert..."

And look, though...when you stop long enough to take a breath, braced for the tirade of guilt that you know will come from John (or is that from YOU? – hard to tell isn't it? Where do those words of accusation come from really?)
When you stop to breathe,

Instead of breaking into a lecture about how you need your priorities straight and how you should drop those middle class luxurious things, and get out your dynamite and start blowing things up.

No – John almost smiles....and turns, back to the water. And the desert wind is soft, and there's something foreign in the breeze...a spice of some kind, a humidity in that desert wind you hadn't noticed before....and he returns to the river, step by step ...
To invite one more person into its waters

HE does this step by step too.

He bends over, as someone is plunged to a baptism of repentance – a pledge of turning to the future.

And you turn, too –
Back to the laundry
Back to the hockey practices and the desk where you will deal with one task at a time until it's almost clear
You bend to your keyboard
You bend to lace the skates of a little kid who needs you
Bend to the laundry basket

Preparing the world for peace
Preparing the world for God
One holy task at a time.

One final image:

If ever you are tempted to think this is a cop-out –

and it COULD be, couldn't it? Everything I've said COULD be a huge excuse not to do anything, not to change, anything and to say "OH but what I'm doing IS holy, IS preparing. Pass me the chips and the remote"

Only you in your heart know the truth of that.
You know how to listen to John's voice inside.
And that too, that listening – requires the bent over posture.
Bend to the depth of your own being. Bend your ear to the whisperings of your own soul.
Your body will speak its truth, and your spirit will tell you what is true, what is holy.
Bend to that task and listen

And then turn, and bend again
(my goodness we're going to need strong backs this Advent!)
Bend again, and remove from your life whatever is in the way of the tiny growing seeds of peace and a new world, like my mom at her flower patch...remove the stones and smooth the soil and maybe dig a little more....

Remove whatever is in the way of simplicity and life. The path you know will lead you to the Promised Land.

In a world where people are flocking to see the movie 2010 – hungry for images of violence and destruction as signs of the coming of God...

Into this world, God comes once again.

A woman and a man bending to the needs of a newborn infant. The woman who sang “God will pull down the mighty from their thrones and lift up those of low degree” – that strong and faithful woman, right at that moment, prepares for the new world by changing the rough diapers of her baby and then gathering him to her breast.

This is the final image of how God comes - and the truth for which we prepare. In all the universe, amid all the swirling atoms and dustclouds and stars and planets.

The rivers and hurricanes and sunrises and waterfalls on this amazing planet

In all the universe – in all the world -

God brings peace by bending to the earth

And the only thing that matters at that moment is one baby.

God bends to the task at hand

And John calls us to do the same.

Amen