Second Sunday of Advent, Cycle B

Old St. Patrick’s Church, 2020

A number of years ago,
when I was spending a lot of time on airplanes,
I took a flight from Chicago to Denver.
My seatmate was a grandmotherly figure,
meticulously dressed, including gloves and a pillbox hat.
In speech and manners, she exuded refined elegance.

The flight was uneventful until the landing.
We hit the ground with a massive jolt,
bounced back up into the air
and slammed back onto the tarmac.

I was a bit shaken, but my seatmate seemed unphased.
As we exited the plane,
with the captain standing at the open door of the cockpit
bidding us farewell,
this diminutive lady stopped in front of the captain,
who towered over her by at least a foot,
and politely asked, “did we land, or were we shot down?”

Most of us do not take surprises, especially unpleasant ones,
so graciously.
Whether it’s a shocking transaction on the credit card statement,
a dead battery on a cold morning,
or a lost election.
If there is bad or even challenging news
about health or finances or relationships
we usually prefer to be eased into it.

The evangelist Mark,
the guy who actually invented the gospel genre,
does not seem to have graduated from that school of thought.

Unlike his students Matthew, Luke, and John
who open their versions of this new literary form
with well-constructed genealogies,
tales of angels and visitations,
miraculous births and visitors from the East,
or even luminous theological reflections
on the eternal Word becoming flesh,
Mark hits the gospel tarmac hard
with the abrupt, even audacious landing of John the Baptist
on that spiritual airstrip in the Judean wilderness.

This central figure in advent readings across the lectionary cycles
is launched into our pre-Christmas consciousness
with little warning.
Outfitted like a prophet,
nourished on a diet befitting some survival show,
he roars onto the scene like a proverbial Judean lion.
Apparently untutored in the ways of political correctness,
he summons people to confess their sins
and prophesizes about the great one to come
who will trade the baptizer’s water for holy fire
in an escalating mission of purification and salvation.

A favorite blog from years ago uniquely captures
the affrontery of this Baptist character.
She does so by putting out a “please help” advertisement
desperately asking:

Can anybody help John the Baptist
find another job this Advent?
Because we know what will happen to him
if he doesn’t stop his in-your-face preaching
and start acting like the rest of us.

His parents named him John which means “God is gracious,”
but he is hardly acting that way.
If he keeps this up, we fear for his life.
You’d think his motto was,
“So many potential enemies, so little time!”

He is going to offend almost everybody
like the Sadducees who make their living
from the money people pay to make sin sacrifices.
His baptism for repentance is competition and it’s free.

He is going to insult Pharisees by telling them
that they are not favored by God
just because of their profession or their pedigree.

He’s also going to infuriate Herod the Roman puppet King
who put aside his first wife
to marry the wife of his half-brother,
which, of course, John will condemn.

If our prophetic friend doesn’t make a radical turn
doesn’t stop offending everyone under the sun,
he is going to be led in chains to prison and be beheaded. [1]

Of course, as we all know,
that is precisely what happened to the Baptist,
which raises an interesting question:
why would Mark begin his gospel
by featuring a character
who would offend so many
and whose life would end so tragically,
a history that Mark had to know?

Is John just a shadowy mirror
of the one whose way he prepares,
except that Jesus’ story
finally pivots to glory in the end?

Or is there something more to this
almost Halloween-ish figure?
Something so critical to Mark’s gospel,
so essential to being a Jesus follower
that he not only launches the first gospel
but teaches us something fundamental about gospel living?

The Jewish mystic Abraham Heschel reportedly told the story
of the small kingdom whose only industry was its agriculture.
Everyone was happy and everyone had plenty to eat –
until one year, when it was discovered to everyone’s horror,
that something had gone terribly wrong with that year’s crops. Something in the crops made whoever ate them insane.
The kingdom was soon in an uproar.
So the monarch hurriedly gathered all her wise counselors together
and met with them around the clock for several days.
Then she called the kingdom together to announce her decision.
“Twelve people will be set aside,” she said.
“The rest of us will eat the crazy-making crop.
But all our food in storage will be set aside for the twelve.
They will eat the old crop.
The twelve will serve the very important function
of reminding the rest of us that we are, indeed, crazy.

I would contend that John the Baptist was the first of those 12.
He’s not the mad one,
he just looks a bit batty to us
because we’re the ones eating the crazy-making crop,
the crops that keep us from conducting ourselves
in holiness and devotion
as Peter notes in today’s second reading.

You may have seen the news that Pat Quinn,
the person who co-founded the ALS ice-bucket challenge,
recently died from ALS at the age of 37.

This wacky idea of pouring ice water over your head
in order to promote both awareness and funds
to fight against this challenging neurological disease
exploded in popularity across the country in 2014
with ordinary folks, celebrities, sports stars
and even an ex-president
chillin’ it for ALS.
In the process, the effort raised hundreds of millions of dollars
to fight ALS and support those who suffer from it.

I’m not sure if Pat Quinn and John the Baptist were close friends,
but they strike me as kindred spirits.
For John, too, was trying to wake people up
to debilitating diseases, not of the body, but of the soul,
disorders that ravage not just individuals
but, even more, disable the social body.

With a prophetic word and summons to wade in the water,
he cajoled his co-religionists
to stop eating the crazy crops
that narrow our vision
and compress our hearts;
the crops that disable us from seeing anyone
who looks differently
speaks differently
or even thinks differently
as a child of God and sibling in Christ;
the crops that induce a kind of social coma,
a debilitating fog that induces us to believe
that we cannot make a difference,
cannot stop the incivility,
cannot stand up against racism,
cannot socially distance out of mutual care
rather than xenophobic fear.

As many commentators recognize
Advent, in general and in today’s gospel in particular,
is marked by road images,
“path” metaphors and
“way” allegories.

Unfortunately this imagery is often domesticated,
reduced to some social pleasantry
like helping someone find a path to a better job
or smoothing out the way for some neighborly introduction.

Our Judean wildman, however,
metaphorically dumps a bucket of ice on such niceties
and instead of inviting us to do a little convivial roadwork,
demonstrates in his own life that the advent challenge,
the advent spirituality
that must imbue the whole of a baptismal life,
is to become the path and not just walk it;
to become the way and not just trod it;
to become blessed channels of grace
And not just witness its dispensation.

And isn’t that precisely
not only what John the Baptist did in his own life,
but also the miraculous gift of the Mother of God?

Mary did not only prepare the way,
she was the way of the anointed one.
She did not simply give Gabriel an ok
on the idea of incarnation,
she gave God a personal pathway for
the Word becoming flesh.
She not only flashed a thumbs up
to God’s birth strategy,
but wholeheartedly embraced this divine maternity
and in the process enabled the birthing
of the very kingdom of God.

There is little doubt
that many of us feel like the community
Isaiah addresses in today’s first reading.
People in exile long for a return to our homeland,
a return to a less chaotic world,
a return to normalcy and some peaceability.

While God promises liberation through the prophet,
Isaiah also signals that life after exile will not be the same.
Israel will have to live in a larger vision of God
and their covenant will no longer be a singular privilege,
but now extended to all the nations.

As we await vaccines and a resurging economy
and less political chaos and more social harmony,
we too recognized that we will be changed
when we emerge from the medical and even moral morass
of this pandemic exile.

For we will have been plunged into an advent spirituality
reshaped as living pathways,
spiritual roadways,
and baptized thoroughfares of just acting and peaceable being.

As the poet reminds us,
there is a blessing in taking up this path forging mission.
But it is a blessing with a twist –
a parabolic blessing –
a true Baptist-like blessing
which we accept with gratitude and caution
as we dare once more to follow the incarnational trek
that not only testifies to an ancient nativity
but that actually births the Christ in our own time
in our own lives.

And so the poet muses:

With every step
you take,
this blessing rises up
to meet you.

It has been waiting
long ages for you.

Look close
and you can see
the layers of it,

how it has been fashioned
by those who walked
this road before you,

how it has been created
of nothing but
their determination
and their dreaming,

how it has taken
its form
from an ancient hope
that drew them forward
and made a way for them
when no way could be
seen.

Look closer
and you will see
this blessing
is not finished,

that you are part
of the path
it is preparing,

that you are how
this blessing means
to be a voice
within the wilderness

and a welcome
for the way.

May the spirit of the Baptist keep us diligent and strong
on this challenging path,
that through us God’s mercy may be revealed
and the gift of incarnation renewed throughout this fractured world, through Christ our Lord.