Third Sunday of Advent A, 2019

There is little doubt that John the Baptist
is one of the most unnerving creatures in all of the gospel narratives.

Which is why you will never see him as a lawn decoration
in this or any season.
Which is probably good,
because he’d probably frighten the children
and throw the carolers off key.

No evangelist does a better job
of underscoring the unsettling nature of the Baptist than Matthew,
which he does in two distinctive ways.

The first we heard in last week’s gospel,
in which the evangelist depicts John
as the gospel equivalent
of the wild man of Borneo,
roaring out of the Judean desert
like some wide-eyed Old Testament Prophet,

spewing challenging prophecies
about axes at the root
and unquenchable fire,
his message apparently authenticated
by his intimidating appearance
of a wardrobe rough crafted from camel hair
and complimented by a leather sash.

This is John the bellower,
John the apocalyptic,
whose words are ignored at one’s peril.

Matthew, however, gives us a second quite different,
but equally unsettling image of the Baptist
recounted in today’s gospel.

Here the bravura is gone.
The ax seems to be laid at the root of his own life,
and his surety about cousin Jesus
seems to dissipate within the confines of Herod’s dungeon.

Changed and chastened,
John is now captive to the very enemy he thought
Jesus might eliminate in the messianic reign.

And he has gotten word from some of his followers
that Jesus is actually leaving the region,
heading north into the Decapolis,
on the opposite side of the country.

Maybe John’s imprisonment was motivation for Jesus
to get out of Judea and harm’s way,
but was this an act of cowardice on the part of Jesus?
Had Jesus gone soft, copped out, skipped town,
signaling the need to look for another?

So a chastened, doubting, even abandoned Baptist
sends a message laced with sadness
and maybe even a little sarcasm.
And his envoys are charged to find out,
Are you the one who will rid the world of evil and greed,
or do we look for someone else?

From this very human portrait of the Baptist
thrown from his prophetic high horse
we hear a common human query,
an insistent personal wonderment,
“Is this the one?”

Lovers ask this question when seeking the beloved.
Voters ask this question when deciding which candidate
warrants their political or even financial support.
Big league scouts pose this question
wondering whether to invest
in an unemployed Colin Kaepernick
or invest 324 million on Gerrit Cole.

This question also goes to the heart of every spiritual quest.
Is this the authentic path to truth?
The key to lasting joy?
The door to eternal life?
Or do we seek another?

For decades scientists have studied the human tendency
to look for information
or interpret data
that confirms what we already believe.
The technical term for this is “confirmation bias”

Multiple experiments since the 1960’s have verified that
humans have a tendency to test hypotheses
by searching for evidence consistent with
our deeply held convictions.

So while most of us think we are being objective
and weighing the facts rationally,
whether it concerns global warming or impeachment,
we are demonstrably biased,
and tend to protect information
that supports our fundamental beliefs.

Thus, when someone actually asks the question
“Is this the one”? or “Do we look for somebody else”?
there is clear evidence
that maybe we are actually open
to consider a position or a person,
a belief stance or a political viewpoint
that is different or even contrary
to what we previously held as unwavering truth.

A few weeks ago, I had the chance
to see the Tom Hanks film about Fred Rogers
“It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood.”

I had already seen the award-winning documentary
“Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” –
the top-grossing biographical documentary of all time
which opened my eyes about a TV personality
who came on the scene after my own childhood.
I was in college when “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood”
debuted in 1968.

And who previously seemed to me
as a somewhat nerdy guy in a cardigan,
who sounded childish to my young adult ears.

The documentary touched me deeply
and introduced me to this Presbyterian minister,
almost too good to be real media educator,
with his affirming messages of love and honesty,
and an unpretentious willingness to tackle scary topics
for kids and adults alike.

I presumed the Tom Hanks movie would be similar,
a kind of collage of vignettes,
that together would provide a charming screen portrayal
of this genuinely kind man.

The movie was quite different than I imagined, however,
And without attempting any pulpit spoiler here,
let me say that my presumptions about the movie were wrong,
As it only focused on one relationship
between Mr. Rogers and a somewhat jaded magazine writer
who had to produce a portrait of Fred Rogers.

While the movie does take multiple liberties,
it is rooted in fact, including [the article published](https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a27134/can-you-say-hero-esq1198/)
[in Esquire magazine](https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a27134/can-you-say-hero-esq1198/) by award-winning journalist
Tom Junod.

The gist of the movie is that Fred Rodgers
appears just too good to be true to the journalist.
who is not only disbelieving.
but at first unwilling to be changed by Mr. Rogers,
and resists being drawn into the magic of his care,
unwilling to say “yes” to that pivotal Mr. Rogers question:
“Will you be my friend?”

We don’t like to be duped by goody-two-shoes wannabe’s.
We don’t like being taken in by politicians
who promise us the world while they line their own pockets.
We don’t like being taken in by a church
that promises us a path to righteousness,
but sometimes jeopardizes the well-being of the most vulnerable
and even becomes a hiding place for abuses.
We don’t like being taken in.

John the Baptist maybe felt the same,
and like an ancient journalist
facing a messianic Mr. Rogers
who seemed just too good to be true,
had to ask again…“Is he the one?”

Because he did not bring an end to Herod’s reign.
He did not liberate the Jews from Roman tyranny.
He did not topple a religious institution run by bloated clergy
and self-aggrandizing pseudo-prophets.

There were still too many poor,
too many marginalized,
too many sick and broken, dying and despairing.
In the face of so many unfulfilled hopes,
how could his cousin Jesus still be the one?

Advent is a season traditionally understood
as a time to prepare for the birth of Christ.
But of course Christ has already been born …
So it needs to be something more.

That something more is a willingness to admit
that Incarnation continues
in every child, in every people, in every time and place.
And that the face of Christ
is splashed across the chaos of humanity
in all of its challenging and delicious diversity.
Advent rehearses our willingness to embrace incarnation
in the most unexpected of people,
in the most unpredictable of events,
in the most unsavory of neighbors.

Which means: for incarnation to be embraced and nourished,
we have to be willing to be duped.
We have to be willing to wonder, “Is that the face of God?”
We have to wager on divine mischief upsetting the status quo.
We have to be willing to say “Yes”
when the most unlikely or truly unimaginable asks.
“Won’t you be my friend?”

Almost 25 years ago I collaborated on a project
that considered the sacramental role of people
with developmental and physical disabilities.

As part of that project,
a colleague wrote this heart wrenching reflection.

“A child is born to us, a son is given to us,” but it was not the son they expected.  Two months early and gasping for life, this Christmas morning gift took them by surprise and turned their lives inside out.  His manger was a small, flat table in the neonatal unit where children are not expected to survive.  He was not wrapped in swaddling clothes but in needles, tape and tubes that covered every inch of his innocent flesh.  One look at him brought you to reverence and softened your heart.  Stalked by death and wounded by a life that began too soon, to behold him was to encounter holiness, to become before the presence of God and be awed.  As the shepherds and the wise gathered around the Christ child to ponder the mystery of God’s great love, this was Christ’s child too.  In this tiny gift, utterly helpless and shockingly needy, humanity and God came together again.  God was lying there, fighting for life, pleading for the world’s recognition; it was an incarnation, another Christmas morning.

The author continued,

“The child’s name is Carl.  He was born with cerebral palsy and he is my nephew.  But on this Christmas morn he was also a sacrament, God speaking to us in cryptic saving ways.  Hidden in an affliction that would mark him for life was a word worth hearing, a grace ready to redeem.  Like every sacrament this outward sign of rebellious muscles and determined heart bore a secret gospel.  God was in this fragile flower, beckon to us with some astonishing news about things human and divine.  In this Christmas morning gift, transparent with neediness to flagrant to be denied, was a surprising, liberating gospel about God and ourselves.  Here was not one of the strong but a child of sacred incompleteness.  Here was a beloved of God with frailty and fracture that could not be disguised.  Here was God where we least expected: hidden away in the lowly, shrouded in the harmless who disturb.”

The author concludes,

“It is through such misbegotten that God speaks to us the most.”

[Paul Waddell, “Pondering the Anomaly of God’s Love,” Developmental Disabilities and Sacramental Access (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994),  53-4.]

Is he the one, or do we look for another?
Is she the one to whom I say “Yes”
when she asks “Will you be my friend?”

Our role in the incarnating gift
hangs in the balance of our answers
to such disturbing and liberating questions…

This season I pray we say “Yes.”
Yes, he is the one.
Yes, I will be your friend,
through Christ our Lord.