

THE WILD MAN OF CHRISTMAS  
King City United Church – York United Ministries  
Sunday, December 12, 2021  
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A couple of years ago there was a series of humorous greeting cards with a monk character on them who looked somewhat like Friar Tuck. One of them on the front read, "On a scale of 1 to 10 you're a 6." Then you open it and the caption reads, "Hey, John the Baptist was only a 4."

Well, I'm not sure how you might rate yourself, but I don't think I would rate John the Baptist as high as a four, at least not in the light of today's reading.

When I think about John bar Zechariah, or John the Baptist as we call him, I picture a kind of Hollywood Biblical movie scene. There's John up to his waist in water baptizing people in the Jordan River. It's idyllic, peaceful, serene, pastoral, calm. People mill about on the riverbanks enjoying a beautiful sun-filled day quietly conversing with each other, about Scripture, I'm sure. It's wonderful.

Usually then John will speak the word we heard last week about preparing the way for the Lord.<sup>i</sup> Then the scene ends with Jesus coming down to be baptized by John. In my imagination, I conveniently leave out the words in between, words that we heard today.

To the multitudes who came to be baptized John said, "You brood of vipers!"<sup>ii</sup> Imagine that, people come down to hear his

message of good news, to be baptized in order to receive the forgiveness of sins<sup>iii</sup> and John rails at them. “You brood of vipers!” It doesn’t seem to fit. It’s inappropriate in the scene.

Who is this guy? Someone has called him the Wild Man of Christmas. Here he comes out of the wilderness in a cloud of desert dust and camel dung, wearing stinking imperfectly tanned skins ripped from animals as clothing. A rugged kind of a guy. A mountain man. If he walked in here today, I don’t know how he would look but I’m sure all of us, one hundred percent, would say, Who is this guy? Who does he think he is? He’s crazy. He’s nuts. He’s a weirdo. Maybe he’s even dangerous. Let’s get out of here.

But the people, the multitudes, did exactly the opposite. They came to him. He drew crowds. He couldn’t be ignored. He made people profoundly thoughtful. He made them consider their lifestyles. He made them change their lives. He offered them not merely judgement - sure, they heard the words of judgement - but he offered them hope:

the hope of forgiveness,  
the hope that things could be different,  
the hope that change and transformation are possible,  
the hope that God really does care for people,  
the hope that God’s caring that has always been confessed and celebrated and enjoyed by the people of God in the past continues into the future and is even now present,

the hope that someone is coming,  
coming from God,  
coming to bring a new quality to human existence,  
coming as the eternal and the divine within the finite and  
the human,  
coming to open a new pathway, a new road into the future.

John the Baptist brought hope and a needy people could not resist him. And so, the people were in expectation and John's preaching was heralded as good news.<sup>iv</sup>

Who is this guy, this wild man of Christmas? He is, in the first instance, the message himself. To alter and interpret McLuhan's famous aphorism, the messenger is the message. John the Baptist himself was part of the message; he embodied it.

How so? In the unexpectedness of who he was. In the oddity of the choice of messenger. Actually, he fit right in with God's unusual plans.

Remember that little poem, How odd of God, to choose the Jews. It was not a criticism of the Jewish people, but rather an observation about the way God does things. God didn't choose the largest and most powerful nation to represent God. God chose instead a small and weak nation, the Jewish nation.

God was and is always making odd choices, choosing not a the strong but the weak, choosing not people we would recognize

immediately as worthy but those we would question, doubt, perhaps even laugh at, but certainly avoid.

The whole Christmas story is full of odd and unexpected choices by God. In the first chapter of Matthew, we find his version of Jesus' genealogy. God has chosen some very strange choices for Jesus' ancestry. God chose Jacob and Judah, cheats and liars, rather than more honest and noble figures like Esau and Joseph. Likewise, Jesus himself would later make strange choices of sinners over the just.

The list also includes kings of Israel but it was those same kings who led to the downfall of the kingdom, decline in Babylonian exile and the loss of the temple. Likewise, Jesus would not choose power but would put a child forward as the choice of who would be first.

And the list ends with a whole series of names from Zerubbabel until Joseph who are so insignificant even in religious terms that they never made it into the pages of Biblical history. Likewise, Jesus would choose insignificant people, fishers and tax collectors who will become our spiritual ancestors within the community of Jesus, the Church.

Matthew's list even takes the unusual step of including women, not obvious saints like Sarah, Rebekah or Rachel, but women like Tamar<sup>v</sup>, Rahab<sup>vi</sup>, Ruth and Bathsheba<sup>vii</sup>, women of questionable repute, or in difficult marital circumstances or seen as publicly scandalous, but women who were true instruments of

God's Spirit and grace. They prepare for Mary who is "found with child" before living with her husband and yet is the vessel of the Holy Spirit in conceiving Jesus.

John the Baptist fits in perfectly into God's odd, strange, unexpected scheme, and so the multitudes of ordinary, insignificant, unimportant, nameless people flocked to him expectant, awaiting the Good News he would convey as a true instrument of God's Spirit and grace.

To them John the Baptist said, You too are part of the message of God, to be true instruments of God's Spirit and grace. "Bear fruits that befit repentance."<sup>viii</sup> Do not count on your background, your ancestry, your parents and grandparents and great-grandparents. Count on God. Trust God. God is able from these stones to raise up God's children.<sup>ix</sup> Trust God for God is making the odd choice of choosing you to be part of the message.

How can that be, they asked. What can we do?<sup>x</sup> How can we prepare? How can we repent, turn around, be different than we are? What can we do?

Luke gives us three examples of what John said to the multitudes, to tax collectors, to soldiers. To each there was a different answer, an answer for that person, but for all there was the same answer. Don't give up your day job. Don't abandon your work. Transform it. Transform your behaviour. As Paul would say later, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy

and acceptable to God...Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."<sup>xi</sup>

Share with others. Don't extort. Don't exploit the gullible. As John Wesley once said, "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can as long as ever...you can!"<sup>xii</sup>

Detach yourself from things, possessions and what you have, and focus on people and who you are.

Quite a long time ago, during the children's time I asked them what was the greatest gift they ever received and the greatest they ever gave. The answers were not things like toys. They were things like love and hugs and times with grandparents. Most of us, I'm sure, if we shared our remembrances of Christmases past and what we remembered as most important, they would be intangibles, like family times, reunions, times when love was expressed, given and received, shared. Even when we cherish things, what is important is not the thing itself, but the feelings, emotions and meaning behind them, represented in them.

This is what repentance is about. This is what preparing for the Lord's coming is about. It's about turning around, changing your orientation from things to people, from yourself to others.

It's about reorienting your life toward God and God's purposes in the world. It's about dreaming new dreams, about catching a glimpse of a new vision, and having those new dreams and visions motivate and direct your life.

Back in July of this year, Jason Ng won \$65,000,000 in the Lotto Max lottery. He decided to buy himself an electric car. More critically, he decided to use the rest to help others. Jason Ng is a veteran with a brain injury. That injury has been difficult to deal with and as a result, he knows firsthand the challenges some people deal with, especially other veterans. He has also travelled extensively and seen poverty and suffering. He has witnessed the waning of hope.

The first person he told about his win was his pastor. He says that he is spiritual and he saw his win as God's gift. "I've just been entrusted to take care of it for a little while."<sup>xiii</sup> "I felt the responsibility of this win immediately. I wanted to be sure to use this money responsibly, so I felt my pastor was the best person to work that through with me." His faith motivated and directed him to catch a vision. He wants to give people hope through a foundation that he plans to establish.<sup>xiv</sup> He is a true instrument of God's Spirit and grace.

We too, regardless of how insignificant we may appear to be, are part of the message of God.

That was good news to those who heard John the Baptist, so good that they wondered, Is he the Christ?<sup>xv</sup> Is John himself the

One sent by God to be the full embodiment of all that is divine within the human? No, John said. No. I am part of the message. You are part of the message. But the One who is to come is more. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He will take all that is wrong within you away and burn it as chaff is blown away and burned. And he will gather to himself all that is good like wheat into the granary. And through his Spirit you will have power to be more than you are, to be changed, to be transformed.<sup>xvi</sup> You will have power to become what he is, a true instrument of God's Spirit and grace. In him, your hopes are fulfilled. This is the Good News from the Wild Man of Christmas. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Luke 3: 4-6. Cf. Isaiah 40: 3-5.

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 3: 7.

<sup>iii</sup> Luke 3: 3.

<sup>iv</sup> Luke 3: 15, 18.

<sup>v</sup> Genesis 38.

<sup>vi</sup> Joshua 2.

<sup>vii</sup> 2 Samuel 11.

<sup>viii</sup> Luke 3: 8.

<sup>ix</sup> Luke 3: 8.

<sup>x</sup> Luke 3: 10. This question would also be asked on the day of Pentecost by those who heard Peter's preaching. Acts 2: 37.

<sup>xi</sup> Romans 12: 1-2.

<sup>xii</sup> John Wesley, *Christian History*, Vol. II, No. 1, quoted in *Aha!!!* October-December, 1997, Vol. 7, No. 1, pg. 56.

<sup>xiii</sup> Hannah Alberga, "'God's gift': York Region resident, military veteran claims \$65 million Lotto Max jackpot", *CTV News Toronto*, July 15, 2021. <https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/god-s-gift-york-region-resident-military-veteran-claims-65-million-lotto-max-jackpot-1.5510513>

<sup>xiv</sup> Elisabetta Bianchini, "Lotto Max \$65,000,000 ticket winner was 'almost homeless' and wants to help other military veterans", *Yahoo!News*, July 15, 2021.

[https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/lotto-max-65-million-jackpot-winner-ontario-military-veteran-220240561.html?fr=sycsrp\\_catchall](https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/lotto-max-65-million-jackpot-winner-ontario-military-veteran-220240561.html?fr=sycsrp_catchall)

<sup>xv</sup> Luke 3: 15.

<sup>xvi</sup> Luke 3: 16-17.