

December 13, 2009 Sermon – Waiting and Watching
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Introduction: As we continue this Advent season, come away to a different time and place. Come away to the time that finds us along the banks of the Jordan River where a young woman discovers herself among the crowd that follows the man known as John the Baptizer.

I have been listening to this man named John for a long time. I know what some of you are thinking – how could I follow some crazy guy who lives in the desert, whose hair is full of dreadlocks, who wears the hair of a stinky camel, and eats bugs? Maybe you just think I like the grunge/granola/hippie/live-in-a-van-down-by-the-river type. I'm not really sure how it all started for me, but I've followed him all over, followed him as he makes his way along the Jordan River. I have even followed him among the reeds of the churning waters of that stream in order to be baptized. I was not the only one that followed him, that heard him preach. All of us did. And when he said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," the very hairs on my arm stood up – I had goose bumps all over – and my body trembled with fear and excitement at those words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." We followed him down the muddy bank into the waters. We confessed our sins and cried out for the repentance that this wild-haired, camel's-hair wearing man preached to us.

And I let him dunk me under that brown water. I remember coming up out of the water, spitting, sputtering, and choking on the grit – and yet, I somehow felt clean. But John kept telling us that he was only preparing the way. He was the messenger sent ahead of one greater than he. Who could be greater than he, I wondered, for up against John, I felt so small and insignificant – he seemed to be destined for greatness, destined for something beyond this world, for who else would have the guts to scream warnings at the Pharisees and Sadducees? (What was I destined for? I was just a woman lost on the fringes of the crowd that followed John. Did I really matter? I had no connections. And yet, I felt the urge to wait for the one to whom John was preparing the way. Would it be the long-

awaited Messiah? Would the one greater than John have anything to do with me?)

Well, you should've been there the day that John saw the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing! I was there – those highly religious men did not see me, but I saw them, and so did John. I will never forget when he pointed right at them (right at them) with a wild and confident eye: “You brood of vipers!” He yelled.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor;’ for I tell you, God is able from these very stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

I have to admit, I didn't understand what all of it meant, but I got the point – being a part of the people of God did not only include those of Abraham. I also know the difference between good fruit and bad fruit – no one wants the bad fruit around to spoil the rest. As amazing as it was to watch and listen to John yelling at the Pharisees and Sadducees, in some way, I got the feeling that it wasn't only directed at them, but at all of us standing in the crowd. For, as law-abiding and God-fearing as they are – they still couldn't cut it! And, if they were in danger of being bad fruit – well, I gotta' tell you that I was getting a little nervous about it, and yet, there also seemed to be something good about it – judgment wasn't being left up to our decisions, to the decisions of the leaders and teachers among us, but depended upon the one for whom John was preparing the way.

In wonderment, I heard John continue: **“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire! His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”**

No one said anything. Everything was still – the crowd, the Pharisees and Sadducees, the locusts, even the river itself seemed to stand still for a moment. All I could hear was the beating of my heart as I stole a glance at John. There it was again! The one John is waiting for is the one who will accomplish judgment and who will accomplish hope by bringing something greater. Instead of feeling small and lost among the crowd, I suddenly felt a sense of urgency and a sense of greatness surrounding the one to whom John was preparing for – was waiting for – and I knew that I too would wait – wait for the powerful one (the one more powerful than any of us) to bring Holy Spirit and fire (I wanted that baptism!) – wait for the one who was coming for me, who would include me! As I looked around at others in the crowd that day, I got the sense that they felt the same way. John’s message was for us. The winds picked up and swirled around me as my eyes rested upon John, the preacher of repentance and the preparer of the way. So I watched – and waited for the one who is to come.

The story of Jesus unfolds this Advent Season where we find ourselves, like the woman along the shores of the Jordan River, watching and waiting for the one who is to come. We find ourselves linked together with John the Baptist in preparing the way, in pointing others towards the one who is greater than ourselves, Jesus the Christ. Do you feel the winds picking up and swirling around you?

(This sermon was first preached by Pastor Becky when she was a senior at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN. Pastor David was the second voice that spoke the bolded portions.)