

December 4, 2022  
 Venturing from the River Banks  
 Matthew 3:1-12\*  
 John the Baptist  
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Can you imagine, there are no newspapers, no competing opinions on cable news, if someone is talking about “tweets” or “twitters” they are commenting on the noise of the birds before the sun breaks the horizon. Most people do not read. But like all small towns, everyone is up on everyone’s business and they know when something interesting or someone compelling is in or around their town.

So along comes John. We may think it was somewhat normal for someone back then to be dressed in a camel coat and dining on honey-glazed grasshoppers. In some ways he sounds like some of the chef characters that inhabit our food channels of today. Of course the next food fad will be locusts and honey. It’s a low carb protein topped with a natural source of sweetness—what’s not to love?

But the reality is—now and as it was then, John the Baptist was a weirdo. He was over the top. But in their world, he was an event, and why not go out and see him. And...And...

Here’s the important part---many of the people who crowded out to the edge of the wilderness were just barely getting by: farmers who were working someone else’s land, religious authorities who were desperately trying to practice their faith without drawing the attention and the violence of the occupying force of Rome. The tax collectors were squeezed by the occupying government, so they squeezed the impoverished peasants. It was a hard, brutal time and the people, ALL of the people were longing for something more. I am sure that on many a day, they rose from their pallets early in the morning, wondering if what they saw, how they scabbled their life together if that was all they would ever know. OR if indeed a leader, a chosen one might just be sent by the Holy of Holies our God to change their lives.

Have you ever found yourself, thinking similarly?  
 Have you ever wondered, well God, is this it?  
 Is this really my life?  
 My world?  
 Will there always be ones who do not have enough?  
 Will there always be dissention in our land?  
 Where in heaven’s name are you God?

Have you?

Heaven knows I have.

So what then, would we do---what would I do---if I were to hear that someone amazing, ( a weird vegan—who had no problem wearing animal skins) was on the edge of the wilderness talking about the whole world changing.

Without a doubt, I am sure I'd go on out to see what he was about. Because I too long for the Reign of God, the transformation of our world, the end to hunger, war, interminable politics, and strife. I would grab my friends and family and I'd go on out to see what was going on.

On the way out, we hear from others that in order to be a part of this new world, the very first step for this transformation was to confess my sins, be washed in the river, cleansed, and then rise from the water free from all sin. That would all sound like a bit much to me. But I'd want to go and watch and see other people doing it. Maybe catch a whiff of their transformation and change. Without the fuss and embarrassment of such a public show and declaration of my many failings and flaws. I'd go to watch.

And I think that's what riles up John. As he stands hip deep in the water Jordan. He's peeved that all these people are standing on the sidelines watching, as if this is a show and not our one and only life. John the Baptist is angry that a lot of people are watching and not taking the risk and actually acting.

But here's the catch—it turns out that John the Baptist and Jesus who follows, neither one of them thinks that coming to see, standing on the edges to watch what is going on is enough.

John says very clearly, "You brood of vipers---what are you doing here?" [Standing around watching.]

Or as Biblical Scholar Eugene Peterson says in his adaptation of the bible, *The Message*— he translates this famous passage writing:

*"Brood of snakes! What do you think you are doing slithering down to the river? Do you think a little water on your snake skins is going to make any difference? Its your life that must change, not your skin!"*

John and Jesus are looking for us to be and to do.

To repent and to risk,

to move from the sidelines to the playing field,

to transcend the barriers that bedevil us,

to follow Christ into the turbulent waters of change

What's your prayer life like right now? In this time of enveloping darkness, how are we spending time with scripture? What prayer practices might we undertake just by getting up 15 minutes earlier? What about reading the opening chapters of

Matthew's Gospel and Luke's Gospel? What about taking some time daily, weekly to feed our parched souls with the water of life? How might that help us prepare? During this Advent season, nurtured and fueled by our prayer how then might we begin to use our gifts and talents to venture forth from the riverbanks to be with Christ in the currents of transformation?

-What are we going to do, to see that our legislators implement sensible changes to gun laws that will keep our children safer?

--What are we going to do as people of faith to cross the political divide in our communities?

Who am I—who are you—who are we listening to so that we might begin to understand a different perspective?

How might we begin to educate ourselves about the very real disparities in our country between people who happen to have white skin and people who happen to have brown or black skin?

How might we move from the banks of the river watching and bravely venture toward the accusations of John the Baptist and the promise of Jesus who follows?

Praying, asking, answering, and living these questions is my hope for all of us in this Holy Season of preparation. Will you join me?

Amen.