

Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12

What does it mean to be realistic? Worldly realism knows that life is tragic, hard and brutal. Realists know what the “bottom line” is. Realists do not get carried away by wild dreams or passionate enthusiasm. Realists have paid the price; they have been through the wars. John the Baptist is a prime example of a gritty realist, it seems to me.

A worldly realism fills the scripture lessons we read during Advent. International conflicts haunt the book of Isaiah, and Herod brutally slaughters children (Mt. 2:16). John calls the people to repent, to take up a new, fruitful life. The Bible confirms what the world knows: life is tragic, hard and brutal. But side by side with these stories of violence and oppression, we read about one of most extravagant hopes of the human heart. The Magi follow a star. The prophet Isaiah predicts the coming of a ruler who...

Won't judge by appearances,
nor decide by hearsay.
He will judge the needy with righteousness
and decide with equity for those who suffer in
the land. (Isaiah 11:3-4)
The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the young goat;
the calf and the young lion will feed together,
and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:6)

How are we to understand the contrast between the brutal slaughter of children and the Magi's hope-filled journey, between the power politics of a twisted ruler and the prophet's vision of a transformed world? If our only standard of realism is that life is brutal, tragic and hard, then we will likely conclude that Herod gives us realism while the Magi and the Prophet Isaiah give us fiction, legend and super hero fantasies.

But what if we hear a different signal in this conversation? What if a different voice, coming from some odd figures like Isaiah the creaky old prophet, a band of Magi or John the Baptist, re-orient our world view and priorities? What if Advent realism means believing in the whole range of what the human heart can envision and enact? Then our Advent worship, music, readings and complex figures like John the Baptist open to us the fullness of who we as human creatures really are, and we what we can do to transform our community to look and live more justly, inclusively and kindly.

I think Advent reframes what is real. Herod and Putin and Daniel Ortega and a host of other authoritarians perpetuate their violence, but the Christ child grows up to inspire us to take the action to restore, shelter and heal (Matt. 11:2—6). Holy realism sees that although life can be hard, tragic and

brutal, there is born in the midst of the world one who will draw out the glorious possibilities of the world's transformation and point us toward the marvelous possibilities of peace.

The figure of John is draped all over these first weeks of Advent but you will never see John the Baptist on a Christmas card. Supposedly, he's a scraggly, isolated eccentric, alone in the wilderness, easily dismissed. But Matthew highlights a score of convincing details like wearing "camel's hair" and a "leather belt" that cast him not as a kook, but as a new Elijah, new messenger of God. And at the same time he becomes the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision of a "voice in the wilderness" ushering in a day when God's glory will be revealed, and "all people shall see it together" (Matt. 3:4). Matthew's point is clear: God has raised up another witness in the wilderness, out beyond the coordinates and control of the empire. His purpose is to be a witness for Christ. God is on the move — and the dawn of the new era of redemption has arrived. Maybe, just maybe, this God can break the tyranny of the brutal empire.

The core of John's message — "Repent, for God's realm has come near!" — is actually a radically open invitation even with its blunt, harsh tone (Matt. 3:2). It's an invitation for everyone and even though wildly unrealistic by standard expectations, it is well-grounded in the essential hope of God. And I don't know anyone, including the most virtuous who would not benefit from an honest, heart-felt confession. You might not see John as a leading advocate for the essential work of DEI/Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, but John looks like an early adopter and team member. John's values are inclusive and remarkably dignifying, since they presume that we have the capacity to rise up and meet it the challenge, to be changed, and to bear the "good fruit" God created us to bear.

And, John's prophetic poetry includes the promise that the Spirit comes, in wind and fire, not to destroy but to refine, to restore, and to empower the children of God to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. To do this, we will have to do something very un-Presbyterian. We will have to let go of our anxieties, our self-absorption, our apathy, our pride, and our sin. For in John's ecosystem, these conditions will be burned away, and the chaff removed — for the sake of the good wheat! Jesus comes that we might be saved, which is to say, restored, set free from the "husks" in our lives and communities — and this is the good news of the Gospel.

When I was an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina, there was a strange, prophet-like character who would drag his battered soapbox onto the edge of Chapel Hill's Franklin Street many afternoons and whirl and wail and whine at the throngs of undergraduates walking past. His message, predicted the sudden, violent, catastrophic end of the world, and the end of life as we knew it as undergraduates. The scorching invitation was to "turn around," "repent," and "give yourself to God" or suffer the flames of the eternal fires of hell. Students mocked him mercilessly as a "John the Baptist 'wanna-be.'" He was about as unappealing as any religious messenger could possibly be.

Generally, we find it hard to relate to people who introduce themselves as bearing a message from God. It's just not easy to warm up to a prophetic personality. If we do turn an ear to them out of curiosity, they tend to wear out their welcome quickly. We have learned too well that such self-proclaimed messengers of God can either be just plain weird or can carry out acts of unthinkable viciousness in the name of their particular image of God.¹¹

But is it true that no messenger of realistic transformation who claims to be led by God can or should be given a hearing? Three figures come to mind. We can recall the passion of Alexander Solzhenitsyn when he first came to the West from the former Soviet Union. As had John the Baptist, Solzhenitsyn's life was formed in harsh and desolate landscapes. The Siberian winds of the Gulag were as cruel in their cold as John's Middle Eastern desert was brutal in its heat. Both were places where life could hang by a

¹ "Opening Act," Herbert O'Driscoll, *The Christian Century*, November 29, 2003.

thread. Both the Baptizer and Solzhenitsyn saw themselves as the bearers of a challenge to what they regarded as an exhausted and defeated culture. Both brought a combative style. One returned to his homeland humbled. John the Baptizer stooped in the filth of Herod's prison to be sacrificed to satisfy a drunken royal whim.

Last Thursday, December 1 was the anniversary of the day in 1955 that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama and became another messenger of transformation. Though it's sometimes thought that she was an old woman who was simply exhausted that day, in fact she was a young 42 years-old and, as she later put it, "The only tired I was, was tired of giving in." She worked as a seamstress, and also served as secretary of the local chapter of the NAACP. Her arrest served as a catalyst around which the Montgomery Improvement Association organized a bus boycott, and for 382 days, participants in the boycott carpooled, walked, biked, and even rode horses to and from work. Black churches raised money — and shoes! — for the boycott, and in the end, the United States Supreme Court ruled that segregation in busing was unconstitutional.² Before she died in 2005, she lived and worked in Detroit, engaged in similar, faithful resistance. Congress honored her as "the first lady of civil rights" and "the mother of the freedom movement".

While John the Baptist's is zealously proclaiming his message of judgment on his own society, I realized what a magnificent human being he is. I wonder if he remains significant because he is the preparer—as he called himself—for Jesus' appearance on the world stage. But John is far from being—"the opening act"—the band that warms up the audience for the main act. He brings the music of his great humanity, his audacity, his generous spirit, his genuine humility, his faithfulness in the face of suffering and even of death itself. No wonder Jesus thought the world of him.

Perhaps the most realistic attribute that commends John to us is that his whole being is focused beyond himself. He has hardly appeared on the public scene when he insists that this is not about him but about preparation for another who has not yet come into public consciousness.

As we prepare for this new era of shalom, John the Baptist prepares us for God's grand entrance: change our hearts, minds, and lives — for the days of peace have come near! Make way! Remove the obstacles, tear off the husks that get in the way! Bear fruit! The Prince of Peace approaches — not on a warhorse like the imperial authorities of the day, but rather as a humble prophet, teacher, and healer, God's beloved child, born homeless, sleeping with the animals. For the days are surely coming, cries the prophet, when no one will "hurt or destroy... for the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea" (Is. 11:9). John the Baptist witness dovetails neatly with Martin Luther's idea that "*God became small for us in Christ; Jesus showed God's heart so our hearts might be opened.*" This is John pointing us toward the God hidden in weakness, the God who quite genuinely is tender vulnerability.

² The Salt Project, "[Theologian's Almanac for Week of November 27, 2022](#)," November 22, 2022.

Isaiah's vision of the peaceful kingdom—a branch growing out of a near-dead stump—only looks like an impossible dream from the perspective of the arrogant, those who rely solely on themselves and refuse to listen to anyone else. People may see the church, our community, the world as a dried-out plant, a dead stump. God sees the potential for shoots and branches. In our time, they remain mere shoots and branches; much unfinished work remains to be done. As John announces, “The kingdom of heaven is near”—near, not here.
