

That's Some Tough Talk!

[Text - Matthew 3:1-12]

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Last Sunday, as some of us gathered as an “After-Worship-Lunch-Bunch” the topic of our Advent Devotional Booklet was raised. Specifically, we talked about the “harshness” of some of the Scripture readings that are associated with the Advent Season - texts that refer to the coming of a Divine judgement and wrath, fire-and-brimstone. The kind of language and imagery we find in this morning’s New Testament reading.

John the Baptist delivers a scathing call to repentance to the people of Israel, at a time of tremendous trouble and anxiety. The Roman Empire has an iron grip on much of the known world, including the land of Israel. Many Israelites feel that their religious society is in need of drastic reform. And many of them, including John the Baptist, anticipate that God is about to send the long-awaited Messiah - a formidable figure - who will overthrow the Romans, and deal swiftly and severely with the corruption within the Hebrew community. They’re expecting a stern and imposing individual, who will usher in the Realm of God with an earth-shattering event - bring Bad News to those who are on God’s “bad side,” and Good News to those select few who are “good enough” to receive it.

It’s like they’re anticipating that the Messiah will come with a list of those who are naughty, and those who are nice. And like most of us - who prefer to think that we are on the nice list, while others are the naughty ones - so it is with many of Israel’s religious leaders. They’re absolutely certain of who will incur Divine wrath: it’s all those *other* “sinners” - tax-collectors and prostitutes, Romans and Samaritans, foreign infidels, and the rest of those “unfaithful” misfits. So stand back! Because the Messiah is on his way to take care of those wayward individuals!

That is the blunt and blistering message of many religious leaders at the time of Jesus, including John the Baptist. However, when Jesus bursts onto the scene, he completely bewilders and angers many of those religious authorities. Jesus teaches with a personal authority and integrity that is refreshingly different from most other rabbis. He performs works of compassion and power - feeding the hungry, healing the sick, embracing lepers, raising-up those who are outcast and downcast. Jesus proclaims a message of Good News, and brings a radically expansive image of a Heavenly Father-*Mother* - whose greatest desire is to gather *all* Her children, like a hen gathers and shelters her entire brood. Jesus speaks of the Holy One as a Divine *Lover* of people, whose primary concern is that this Love be reciprocated. And perhaps most shocking of all, Jesus contends that the Holy One is best served - not through acts of religious piety - but by passionately loving our neighbors as we love ourselves.

John the Baptist is absolutely correct in believing that the Messiah is coming to “take care” of the sinners of this world; but his understanding of how the Messiah will do this, is clearly off-base. John anticipates a resounding blast of law and judgment; but Jesus brings a redemptive blessing of love and grace. That’s why John later asks this question of Jesus: “Are you the One who is to come, or should we look for another?” In spite of John’s greatness, he has trouble grasping Jesus’ *greater* vision of the wonderful, welcoming, inclusive Divine Realm.

John knows all about Divine judgment and wrath. He’s quite familiar with the harsh words of the Hebrew prophets; and his own message certainly reflects those words. So when Jesus launches his ministry, John anticipates more of the same - only this time even more powerful and devastating. Nevertheless, John is mistaken. Rather than ushering in the Divine Realm with a spectacular, cataclysmic event, Jesus comes to establish that Realm within the hearts and lives of ordinary people. And rather than bring more pain and grief to a world already struggling beneath the load, Jesus comes to share that pain and grief and struggle. He is totally committed to live his life, and even

give his life, so that the message of Divine love and grace will be clear and tangible to everyone!

The message of Jesus the Messiah, is a message of *Good News*! And it's a message that's perfectly in sync with the messenger himself. Jesus not only talks about Divine compassion and wholeness, forgiveness and freedom - he embodies those qualities, and graciously offers them to anyone who desires, including you and me. Today, Jesus Christ calls *us* to be messengers who embody that Good News: who feed the hungry, heal the sick, lift-up the oppressed, and welcome *all* people with acceptance and love. Jesus shows us the way, and *in-spires* us - breathes into us the power to make it happen! Not the power of dominating control, but the power of Divine Compassion; a power that really *will* "take care" of us sinners, as we learn to humbly "take care" of one another.

As Bradley Schmeling reminds us in our Continuing Testament, "Preaching judgment is the easy part. Jesus, on the other hand, enters into the heart of human life, and takes into himself all those things that separate us from God....On Easter morning, what we sinners get is Christ's ongoing life. We may indeed be worthy of judgement, but what we get from Jesus is a pathway to new Life!"