

ADVENT II

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the realm of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of God, make the paths straight.'" Matthew 3:1

No secret to most of you that the irascible Baptizer is one of my favorites. He appears every year in Advent, for two Sundays in a row, and again during Epiphany for the Baptism of Jesus. But no matter how frequently he appears, he never becomes easier to understand. He is ancient, ascetic, weird. He dresses in camel's hair, which I expect would not be comfortable by any standards, and subsists on grasshoppers and honey, not exactly a balanced diet.

He may remind us of contemporary eccentrics who go off to live in the wilderness, whose lives may intrigue us to read about, but whom we scarcely want to emulate.

Here's how one novelist, Reynolds Price, describes the scene we've just heard from the Gospel

It was near sundown and the mob who came daily from Jerusalem—lawyers, priests, rich women, whores, wretches—had ridden southwest back up through hills toward the golden Temple or were cooking over their fires on the east bank. The famous man...was John the Baptizer. John had cried out here since the winter solstice against all the evil hearts around him.

John warned of God's taut patience and wrath, the imminent coming down of God's last plan in fire and terror. He would say, 'One stronger than I is coming whose sandal I am not fit to loosen. The winnowing fan is in his hand. He'll utterly sweep his threshing floor and gather the good wheat into his barn. He'll burn the chaff in roaring fire. Take shelter now. Thresh your own grain.

John offered a ritual washing from error, for readiness. ...To the eye he made a believable image of the prophet Elijah whose return was expected as the near forerunner of God's anointed. Many hoped that the longed-for man, God's son Messiah, would roll Rome into the Roman sea, mount Israel's throne and open souls to God's whirlwind—God's hand in history redeeming time.

Three Gospels

Whatever John offers, he does not offer comfort. He does not promise mercy and balm in Gilead and all the delights of heaven. What he prophesies, and what he represents, is judgment and change, radical, earth-shattering change.

As I meditated about the Baptizer, and my message for this morning, the figure who came into my mind and heart was Bishop Barbara Harris. She wears ultra suede, not camel's hair, and she's not exactly ascetic, she smokes and drinks with endless relish. But beyond the superficialities, I think she has much in common with John.

Barbara is, of course, our bishop emeritus, the first woman to be elected bishop in the worldwide Anglican Communion, in 1988. When we elected her here in 1988, the woman standing next to me at Convention stood up and cried, "There is a God!" We were making history, and we knew it. We were electing judgment and change, radical, Church-shattering change. And for women the victory seemed especially thrilling and hopeful. We believed, some of us at any rate, that Barbara's election represented judgment on the male hierarchy of the church— that 2000 year legacy that we were still, are still, trying to overcome. And it certainly meant change; Barbara's election ushered in a new era, we believed, for women's leadership in the Church.

So Barbara immediately, and forever, became a huge world figure, not only because of what she would say and do as bishop, but because of what she represented, what she symbolized. The Church is in the business of symbols, after all, and here was a most incredible symbol: a divorced, single, African American woman without a seminary education, a woman who had led the procession in the irregular ordination of eleven women to the priesthood in Philadelphia in 1974, was now the first Anglican woman bishop.

Many of you who were not in the Church or are too young to have registered this event, are nonetheless very aware of the cataclysmic and ongoing consequences of Gene Robinson's election as the first openly gay Episcopal bishop. The uproar following Barbara's election took the same course. She received death threats. We weren't sure the consents would come through for her consecration. A man got up and protested, in vile words, at that consecration. Individuals and parishes left the Episcopal Church. People and parishes refused to receive communion from her. 50 bishops in the Anglican

Communion told the Archbishop of Canterbury that they were not in communion with her.

Sound familiar?

Bishop Harris, in many ways, paved the way for Gene Robinson. On the one hand, she provided hope and promise for women everywhere, churched and unchurched, of all races and walks of life. And for progressive people everywhere. And, I assume, for African Americans. She was inspiration incarnate. She was evidence of what's possible in God's marvelous and ever-changing world. I can't count the times that some woman, somewhere, when I've revealed my vocation, has said, "Oh, you people have that Black woman bishop. That's so wonderful."

On the other hand, Barbara's election has caused violent backlash, splits in the church, horror among conservatives, and vitriol among hate-mongers. As a staunch advocate for LGBT justice, she aroused the animosity of legions of anti-gay folk as well.

Sound familiar? Sound like what's happened in the years since Gene's election?

Barbara has said to me more than once, "Anne, you know that gay stuff is all about women really." By which she means, it's all about straight men, really, being afraid of losing their supremacy of power, being afraid of equality in whatever form. The fundamental issues are the same and so, tragically, are the way events have played out across the world stage.

Here are some things that Barbara is not. She is not a mother figure. She is not warm and nurturing. She is not necessarily gracious. Shortly after her consecration I went to meet with her to invite her to an event the Episcopal Women's Caucus was planning in her honor. In the course of the meeting I said that I hoped to get to know her and to do whatever I could to support her. I proposed that we might have lunch sometime. "Well, Barbara said, "I guess I have to eat." We never did have that lunch.

Barbara was not, as we women of this diocese had hoped, a bishop for us. She did little or no personal mentoring that I know of. She was, instead, a bishop to the world. That's what she was called to be, and that's what she has been, tirelessly, splendidly, and obediently.

As most of you know, almost 10 years ago now some members of St John's and from diocesan staff confronted me in an intervention about my addiction to alcohol. Bishop Harris was involved then, and it was her presence, above all, that made me keenly aware that my vocation was on the line. She looked like she'd rather be having a root canal than be in that room. But she was the boss. When I tried to bargain about the timing, she just waved an airline ticket at me and said, "you're going to Hazelden tomorrow." And that was that. She called me to account, as she has been calling the Church and the world to account throughout her long and distinguished ministry. She also said, "Anne, you are one of the best priests in the diocese, and we want you to be even better." I clung to those words, and prayed with them, during the difficult weeks and months that followed.

Recently I ran into Barbara in the diocesan offices. She's 80 now, she's retired, and she suffered a stroke last summer. She's a bit shaky, but she still works a good deal. I spoke to her about an intervention I anticipated participating in, and told her, as I have before both publicly and privately, what a great difference she and her leadership had made to my sobriety and my life. She took my hand, and she said, "An intervention is a hard, hard, thing to do. It's very hard. But if it works, it means everything..." Who knew, that with all the hard things Barbara has done, she would count that intervention among them?

I suspect that the Baptizer was not a big dispenser of warm hugs, not a master of intimacy. If he had the healing power of *touch*, as Jesus did, those are not recorded in the Gospels. What he did was call people to account. And he spoke, and speaks, of a God who cares, deeply and passionately, and who also demands accountability. He brings us face to face with the Holy. He brings good news to what may seem like meaningless and haphazard world, good news of justice. If that's not healing, I don't know what is.

And he prepares the way for one even greater than he.

Amen