

DRAGON SCALES
Sermon for Advent 2A-Mt 3:1-12
LPC, 12/4/16

Take a look at the picture of John the Baptist in your bulletin today. Is he in any way attractive to you? Does that look like the kind of person you would go out to see ... whom you would travel any distance to see as if he were your favorite rock star?

If his appearance doesn't put you off, consider the kinds of things he is reported to have said:

- "Repent!"
- "You brood of vipers!"
- "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"
- "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!"
- "The one after me will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire!"

Now there is an element in many of us that loves to be scared. The current popularity of zombie movies testifies to that. Were people going out from Jerusalem and all Judea for that exciting frisson of horror?

John, we are told, had set up business rather far from civilization and travel in those days was difficult, dangerous and expensive. I doubt people, especially poor people, would go to the trouble of wilderness travel just for a pleasurable frisson of horror.

John was offering these people something special, something that was worth trouble, and danger and expense... something they needed, although they may not have been able to articulate it. What might that have been?

In the current age, people still flock to certain persons whom they feel have something to offer. Politicians, as one example, attract ardent followers with promises that have a widespread appeal. These promises fall into two categories: either a return to something valued and perceived abandoned by the culture as a whole, or something completely new: a new hope that will take us out of all our current problems.

Every campaign starts with glittering promises and bright hopes, and every regime ultimately disappoints. I am not suggesting we give up on politics in despair. Government is necessary for people to live in any sort of peace and prosperity, and when we have a voice in government we are well advised to use it. No, what I am suggesting that any formula intended to provide human beings with peace, satisfaction and contentment will fail if it depends solely on changes in the outside world.

Human beings are wont to play the "If-only" game. And the "If-Onlys" often have to do with changes outside oneself: "If only my kids got along I would be happy." "If only my wife understood me..." "If only my husband didn't drink..." "If only I had a satisfying job..." "If only we had enough money..." "If only this country weren't peopled by idiots..."

It doesn't take a genius to recognize that external circumstances do not provide happiness and contentment. There are lots of people who apparently "have it all," and yet are unhappy, and there are people who not only survive but thrive and radiate joy in the most abysmal circumstances. Happiness does not come from circumstances. Happiness comes, ultimately, from within.

People recognized that John the Baptist offered something about the secret of happiness. John the Baptist was in fact pointing toward salvation itself. And his message had very little to do with the outside world and with circumstances. His message had to do with people's innards.

His message was repentance. His message was about clearing away whatever is in us that puts up barriers to God. When he talks about trees being cut down and chaff being burned he is not talking about separating the righteous from sinners, saving the righteous and damning the sinners. Put that idea right out of your head. What John the Baptist is talking about is clearing out the worthless and the rotten within each of us.

This is what repentance means. Repentance does not mean becoming a hermit or giving up something you enjoy. It means spring housecleaning for the soul: tidying, cleaning up, and clearing out the garbage, the clutter and the unnecessary.

Repentance of course is not painless. In the fantasy Narnia series by C. S. Lewis, there is a character named Eustace. He is introduced with the words, "There was a person named Eustace and he almost deserved it." Eustace is a very unpleasant boy, greedy and disagreeable. He becomes a dragon because he is so mean. For a time he enjoys his dragonish power and wealth, but after a point he realizes that he is lonely and miserable and wants to be a boy again. His wish is granted, but first his dragon scales have got to be peeled off one by one, which causes him great discomfort. However, he is returned to human form, and although he is not perfect, he becomes a new boy, beloved by his friends and useful to them.

Repentance is the process of peeling off the dragon scales that have accumulated through our pettiness, selfishness and meanness, and returning to the human form that other people are able to love. This generally provides such relief that people find new life, freedom, and much joy.

This new life is what John the Baptist revealed was possible. This is why John was so popular with people who knew they carried around a lot of dragon scales. All of us, at some level, share this knowledge about ourselves (that we are more or less scaly.) What made the Pharisees and Saducees such a brood of vipers is that they refused to recognize how scaly they really were, having convinced themselves that following the letter of the law was all they had to do to be true children of Abraham.

Being a dragon is an attractive option on the surface. Dragons are powerful. Nobody pushes them around or takes advantage of them. No one takes away their rights or challenges their freedom. But being a dragon is ultimately a solitary, unrewarding, miserable experience. By preaching repentance, another word for which is freedom, John the Baptist shows a way back to humanity, a way ultimately made possible by the one who comes after, Jesus Christ.