

St. Thomas's Episcopal Parish in Newark  
Newark, DE  
Second Sunday in Advent – December 4, 2016/Year A  
Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12  
The Reverend Paul W. Gennett, Jr.

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*May my words reveal the greater glory of God.*

AMEN

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This past week, clergy of the diocese gathered for a day of continuing education and time together. It was a palpable time of **sanctuary**, being together for a time of needed rest, renewal, and mutual encouragement as we weather these tumultuous times and emotions from all sides and opinions over the past month. One colleague said she felt like she was in a perpetual spin cycle like that of a dryer, stuck in one place and being burned again and again, to the point which she is fearful to preach about anything! Another imagined he was standing in a room of long-tail cats, and that no matter what he said or did, he would step on one of those tails and endure the offending screech afterward.

Our table conversations focused on the scripture readings today, in particular the Gospel. In this season when so much of culture has propelled us well beyond preparing ourselves for the spiritual remembrance of Christmas, **and then comes John the Baptist**. We imagined in jest what it might be like to have John the Baptist as the head greeter and usher for the Christmas Eve services. We knew full well that after his first bellowed “*You brood of vipers*” to anyone, our enlightened sensitivity and sensibility would be hollowing away like those long-tail cats.

Perhaps we can make space at our Advent table for John the Baptist as well. Perhaps John offers words of hope, empathy, and encouragement that we miss hearing because we stop listening too soon. I hear John's word to spiritual preparation and renewal as a **compassionate call**. One that reminds me we come each year to REMEMBER the birth of Jesus as the Christmas celebration, Love come down to earth, what we are PREPARING for every day is what we proclaim each week in the Nicene Creed – “**He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.**”

So what John the Baptist has preached to this preacher, on this day, is the compassionate call of John **to ignite ... to invite ... to excite**. Because being compassionate always requires **taking responsibility to do something about it**.

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On the Second Sunday of Advent, the Word of God spoken by Isaiah reveals what the Messiah will be like in this age, and the age to come as carried forward by John the Baptist. This Messianic King was to be a descendant of David, the son of Jesse, hence the reference to the shoot springing to new life. The compassionate witness of the prophet's point to the Good News

we can receive by doing our Advent work now. When we can open our hearts and souls to God, we can move from **repent** to a new life imaged by an entirely other set of **re-** words, like **renewed ... recreated ... rejoicing!**

Actually I am happy to have John the Baptist makes his appearance each Advent Season. What sets John apart for me from all the other characters of our New Testament is the truth that generations of preachers, Sunday School teachers, and countless others have **failed to tame him**. He resists the domestication we try to do to blur the tension of those hard edges of many Gospel characters so we can just make the Good News “nice.” John resists, but not without compassion in his call and **taking responsibility to do something about it**.

So John **ignites**. We have become a culture that needs, nay demands, **our space** in relating to the other. Sometimes, to the point of hypervigilance, we over-scrutinize the other we consider to invite into our space. While I recognize and encourage good boundaries in life, it is the likes of John lack of boundaries by his compassion that makes him an irritant, then and now.

Nobody invites John the Baptist to be a messenger in Advent, bellowing his lungs out to repent. No Gallup poll was taken that affirmed this was a good idea to hear during our Christmas preparation. No election was held, no town meeting convened, no Facebook debates rage, no authorization from our Vestry or any other church body. Out of the wilderness, many thinking this was the returning Elijah they keep the space at the table and door open for each Passover, **John just shows up – without permission or license or theological degree**. John shows up with God-enflamed compassion for ALL of God’s people, **even and especially for** the entitled religious elite of the day. And for this God-enflamed compassion, John was **taking responsibility to do something about it**.

So this is how John **invites**. Our Black Friday and Cyber-Monday culture tells us our fulfillment is by feeding our highest pleasure drives – making money, amassing goods, highly esteemed stature in our society, and attaining the fullest satisfaction of my wants and needs ... **and then comes John the Baptist**. John protests this most often unconscious system, and he does so in a whirlwind of non-conformist compassion. John’s wilderness formation clears the way in his body, mind, and soul to proclaim God’s kingdom coming with compassionate authority. If John had been undergirded by an impressive title and equally large compensation package, his word would have been dead in the water.

Then John **excites**. If we stop listening to John after that *brood of vipers* response, we then miss all the additional **re** words after **repent**. In his heart, John’s message is **a compassionate creative word** that God desires to embrace us into the Love come down to earth that we so deeply desire to embrace this season as well. The populace of John’s day knew they were in a time again of being out of step with God’s kingdom desires – and they had plenty of history as a people of God before to know what that looked and felt like.

Yet the change they desired, this new **re** life through baptism was only the beginning. This decision and action echoes the third step of the Twelve Steps – “**Made a DECISION to turn our will over to the care of God as we understand God.**” This is the essence of John the Baptist’s compassionate call that we can truly live into this gift come amongst us, this eternally true Presence of the season, and **take responsibility to do something about it.**

The call of John is truly **to ignite, invite, and excite** – and to **take responsibility to do something about it.**

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While our tradition does its level best to hold the invitation of Advent before us, preparing for the REMEMBRANCE of the birth of Jesus and importantly everyday living for “**his coming AGAIN in glory ...**” it has been an uphill struggle. Advent now seems to be re-branded as time to hang the lights, trim the tree, buy the gifts, buy the gifts, and buy more gifts as we hum along with Nat King Cole’s “**chestnuts roasting on that open fire.**” Yet the winter darkness invites the slowing and settling of our souls that contemplation offers – **and then comes John the Baptist.**

So what I hear John inviting me to be is to join in the **adventure** that Advent living can offer. A new pathway, renewed life, restoration and reconciliation with others. Like the young boy in a room full of horse manure, yet who digs with joyful abandon to find the pony underneath, I hope I will dig with the same fervor into the deeper and higher call of John, and Jesus, and God. To live fully into the compassionate call of Love with each and every one I meet, **to ignite, invite, and excite**, and to **take responsibility to do something about it.**

*AMEN*