

Last week began the season of Advent, these 4 weeks leading up to the day of Christmas when we will celebrate the birth of Christ. Last week we read a Scripture about the future return of Christ which I shared is a sign of hope and not fear. This week we will be reading about the character of John the Baptist.

The story of John the Baptist usually makes it into one of the Advent readings each year. That is because John the Baptist is a very important character in announcing the coming of Christ. We will discover in our reading that lots of people seek out John the Baptist. People are coming from near and far to come and be baptized by him.

We don't know how John became so popular. Some wondered if he was the return of the Old Testament character of Elijah. Elijah was the Old Testament character who did not actually die on earth but was whisked away into heaven on a chariot. So let's read about how Matthew describes who John is and what John does.

### **Read Matthew 3:1-12**

The way John is described is not very appealing to us. He is described as eating locusts and wild honey and his clothing is camel's hair and a belt. But nonetheless, people are coming to him from all over to be baptized by him.

But then John's words take an angry turn when some Pharisees and Sadducees come for Baptism. Pharisees and Sadducees were two of the three major Jewish religious sects during the day. But John has some very harsh words for the Pharisees and Sadducees. He calls them a "brood of vipers." Not exactly words we ordinarily say to someone coming for baptism.

But John criticizes them for believing that faith in God is about what kind of soil you are born into. In other words, John says that faith in God and following God's will must be a personal choice that we make. We can't just claim our ancestry and think that being born in the right religious family is all that we need to be faithful to God.

Giles Fraser from England tells the story about seeing his newborn baby for the first time. He writes, “He was no more than 30 seconds old, first placed on my wife’s chest and then into my arms. Perhaps it was the combination of nervous anxiety and exhaustion but, as his limbs scratched furiously at the air, I began to sing him a song.

And the song I sang was the first thing that popped into my head: “Blue is the color, football is the game, we’re all together, and winning is our aim ...” The anesthetist laughed. He too was a fan of the Chelsea team.” Chelsea, if you don’t know, is a famous soccer team in England.

Giles Fraser then continues describing that moment by saying, “My son was born at 4.04pm on Monday at St Thomas’ hospital, in Waterloo. It was half in jest, but even before he had a name he was claimed as a fan of Chelsea. And perhaps it was then that I became alert to all the other identities that were about to be loaded onto him.

As my child lay in my arms, as yet unnamed, I entertained the passing thought that this was the only moment in this new life’s entire existence that he would be genuinely passport-less, religion-less, unaligned. Soon my son would be given a wristband with a number. And then there would be the initiation ceremonies of religion. And later still he would be registered with the state authorities.

Fraser then concluded his words by asking, “Which passport will my son take up? He is entitled to the British, Polish and Israeli nationalities. What language will he speak with his mum? Within days, his place in the order of things will be determined. And much of his perspective on life and his prospects will have been shaped. Yet as I sang him that silly song, I was overtaken by a powerful sense of the arbitrariness of the identities in which he was being clothed.”

In other words, this baby, like all babies, was given an identity and would be given a set of beliefs that he would be guided to accept.

None of us had any choice in the way we entered this world and who held us for the first time. None of us had any choice concerning what we looked like and the color of our skin. None of us had any choice concerning the language that we were taught to speak.

None of us had any choice as to whether we were born into a family that had lots of resources or few resources. None of us had any choice as to what we were taught about religion as children. In other words, none of us had any choice concerning the type of soil that we were planted in.

We don't know anything about what kind of life that John the Baptist was born into. But we do know that he talked about what kind of fruits that we bear. It's not about our ancestry. Our life is about what we bear.

Today we welcomed Kruz Richards into this church through baptism and his family through Reaffirmation of their Faith. Kruz is truly blessed to be born into this loving family which has now made a commitment to raise him up in the Christian faith. Kruz did not have a choice in that. He did not choose his family and he did not choose what they will teach him. Although I will say after getting to know this family a little bit over the past few months that choosing this family would be a really good choice for him to make!

But John the Baptist says that what happens to Kruz and to all of us is very important. We all have a responsibility to be good role models to Kruz so that he grows up to bear good fruit in the world.

And how does he and all of us go about bearing good fruit in the world? John the Baptist invites us to begin sharing good fruit through repentance. For many of us we think that repentance means saying we are sorry for something. And that is a part of what it means to repent.

But repentance is really about re-ordering your life. Repentance is about resetting your life. Repentance is about making a choice to re-orient our priorities to be closer in line to God's priorities. Repentance is realizing that God is pointing you one way, that you have been traveling another, and that God is inviting you to change course.

Today we are invited by John the Baptist to do that. Today we are invited by John the Baptist to repent and re-set our priorities. We don't have to wait for January 1<sup>st</sup> to do this re-orientation. John the Baptist invites us to do it during this season of Advent.

So I invite you to examine your life and I will examine mine. What are we doing to bear good fruit? I was in a meeting this week with some folks in the Muslim community and they shared something with me from their faith that I pass along. They shared that they believe that one hand holds their good deeds and their other hand holds their bad deeds. On judgement day they believe that God will look at their hands and see if the hand which holds their good deeds is heavier than their hand that holds their bad deeds.

Now, the Muslim faith like the Jewish faith has too much works righteousness for me and not enough grace in my opinion. That is one reason I am glad that I am Christian because of our emphasis on God's grace. But I do think we are invited to take John's words seriously and examine our lives and ask ourselves what kind of good fruit are we bearing.

We are invited to repent. Re-examine our lives.

And look at ways to bear some really good fruit in our family, in our church, in our local community, and in the wider community.

Let us take John's words to heart and repent and seek to bear good fruit. AMEN.

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-Fraser, Giles, "Many of Our Beliefs are not chosen, We are born into them," <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2016/dec/01/many-of-our-beliefs-are-not-chosen-we-are-born-into-them>

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